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# JEEVADHARA

## RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT – II

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Vincent Sekhar

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**A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH**

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## **Religious Institutions and Social Development - II**

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## Editorial

The present issue of *Jeevadhara* continues with last year's topic "Religious Institutions and Social Development" as Part II. Religions are situated in society among social groups, institutionalized and structured to the most extent. Every religion has a social idea and service component, to keep itself relevant to the society. In that sense, every religion is prophetic in its engagement. Every religion believes and assures a society of peace, prosperity, and fellowship. Religions keep promising 'this-worldly' happiness besides emphasizing 'other-worldliness'. In contemporary times, religions, bereft of social focus and involvement, are seen 'meaningless' and 'dreadful' by many, especially by youngsters who want religions to be the vehicle of social elevation, and peace rather than war.

Established and structured religious traditions (like Christianity) have published a series of well-written social documents, surveying the fleshy part of peoples' engagement in society and politics. These documents are, at the least for the Christians, motivating, admonishing, and warning in many ways. There are other people who do not belong to any structured religion like the humanists, tribals, nature worshippers, etc., who also lead a 'disciplined' moral and social life with minimum structures. NGOs working with them with certain devotion and religious commitment make known such people's identity to the Govt. officials and to the public, fight for their rights, help them in their education and employment, and restore their face with dignity. There are other occasions, especially crisis like the earthquake and the floods, when religious institutions plunge into social service and charity.

Keeping these in mind, this issue of *Jeevadhara* further explores the laudable acts of charity and kindness of religious communities and

their institutions. Their service has made an impact on society in specific ways. Dr. Paul D'Souza and Dr. Teena Anil attempt to understand religion as a concept and an engagement in the task of nation building through a case study of Caritas India and the development interventions. Dr. Uma Maheswari explores the spirit and impact of Vedanta on Sri Ramakrishna Mutt and their mission in service, particularly in reference to the Institution in Salem. Dr. Jeyanthi focuses on the services rendered by the Prison Ministry India (PMI) to the prisoners and to their family in Tamilnadu especially in Madurai and Palayamkottai Central Prison in the context of their problems and family, and the challenges faced by the PMI during their rendering of service. Dr. Faizur Rahman brings to our notice the humanitarian services extended by the well-known mosque-cum-institution in Chennai, the Anjuman-E-Himayath-E-Islam, based on the precious path and Islamic way of life. And finally, Dr. Anne Escrader expounds the *L'Arche* community started by Jean Vanier in 1964 in France, its concept and pedagogy, and how it engages society in service based on her real experiences with this community in Canada.

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# Development Interventions of Religious Organizations in Contemporary India

Paul D'Souza and Teena Anil

The article attempts to examine developmental interventions of religious institutions in contemporary India through a case study of *Caritas India* and its interventions in five major disaster-affected areas. Dr. Paul D' Souza is the Head of the Department of Dalit Studies in Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, premier Centre for Research, Training and Action for the marginalized communities in India. Dr. Ms. Teena Anil, his associate in Research, works on exclusion in education of the marginalized communities and on urban space and citizenship rights. <teenaanil2002@gmail.com>

## 1. Introduction

Over the last century, the concept of 'development' has undergone great transition to a multi-dimensional nature with a wide range of meanings, many objectives and alternative measurements (see Kurian, 2017). The eradication of poverty and imparting socio-economic justice to the vast masses has remained one of the central objectives of development. Amartya Sen (1999) approached the conception of 'development' beyond socio-economic measurements to building up of human capabilities. He also broadened the objectives of development as freedom and stressed the importance to 'social participation' of vulnerable sections and promotion of human voice and choice to gain greater access to their 'entitlements'. The concept of human development beyond economic development is now widely accepted. However, before we go further, it would be apt to understand how development has begun to unfold and emerge from one dimension of an economic aspect to sustainable multi-dimensional framework.

Human development, according to the United Nations Development Programme, 'is about creating an environment in which people can

develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests' (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev>) i.e. in promotion of common good. The practice of development has brought multiple actors - government and non-governmental organisations and the United Nations Organisation - individually and collectively to unfold the 'development paradigm' to the underdeveloped sections of society. The UNO from its very inception accorded top-most priority to the idea of development (Whitman, 2011). The UNO also declared the late decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as 'development decades' focusing on development, continuing to pursue the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and for the next 15 years the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs). A number of non-governmental organisations ranging from local to international also adopted 'development' as the goal of their 'social and economic action' (Desai, 2011).

## 2. Religion and Development

In the Western world, secularization was regarded as an essential part of the process of economic development and with the principle of separation of church and state, theories of 'modernization' generally perceived no role for religion in the modern secular world. The separation of the sacred and the secular has been accepted as a mainstream attitude in the Western world, introducing the presence of two Cities, the City of Men and the City of God<sup>1</sup>. Religion and politics stood apart as distinct fields of operation as "private and public spheres". 'The separation between Church and state resulted in a power transfer from religious to secular state institutions in industrialising Western countries that witnessed the emergence of a rational legal order under the authority of non-religious social institutions' (Carbonnier, 2013). For several decades, both liberal and Marxist experts saw states as playing the central role in the process of development through their commanding position in the governance of society (Haar and Ellis, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Walter, Fust. Opening Address in the Proceedings of the Workshop *Religion, Politics, Conflict and Humanitarian Action*: May 18–19 2005, Geneva, Switzerland. [http://graduateinstitute.ch/files/live/sites/iheid/files/sites/ccdp/shared/Docs Religion,politics,conflict,humanitarianism\\_workshop%20proceedings.pdf](http://graduateinstitute.ch/files/live/sites/iheid/files/sites/ccdp/shared/Docs%20Religion,politics,conflict,humanitarianism_workshop%20proceedings.pdf)



On the other hand, Haar and Ellis (2006) argue that religion, widely acknowledged as an emerging force in world affairs, has the potential to play a positive role in the development process, in development policy as well as in implementation. During the second half of the 1990s, with a change of approach in development, the international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have been discussing the potential role of religion in development (Marshall and Keough, 2004). By end of the century increasing the role of Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) in development policies and programmes was advocated to attain desired development outcomes across the developing world. It was proposed that both state and non-state actors – secular and faith-based -work together purposively towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (Haynes, 2007).

### **3. Contemporary Situation:**

#### **Role of Faith-Based Organizations**

Religious institutions play crucial role in and for sustainable development, making a difference to the people they engage with especially, the marginalised groups and communities. FBOs are now widely recognised as important actors in development in implementation as well as in policy making. Faith Based Organization (FBO) defined<sup>2</sup> as an organization, with or without non-profit status that provides social services and is either religiously-motivated or religiously-affiliated (Goldsmith, Eimicke, and Pineda, 2006) occupy a considerable space in the domain of development in most parts of the world. Their involvement in development activities is vast and diverse, ranging from service provisioning like education and health to conflict resolution (Sobin, 2010). Today, faith-based organisations remain highly prominent actors in the aid industry (Carbonnier, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> There is no generally accepted definition of an FBO. FBOs are however generally characterised as having one or more of the following qualities: affiliation with a religious body; a mission statement with explicit reference to religious values; financial support from religious sources; and/or a governance structure where selection of board members or staff is based on religious beliefs or affiliation and/or decision-making processes based on religious values (Ferris 2005: 312).

#### 4. Religion and Nationalism: Indian Context

Religion is understood as a means through which a nation and group of people express its identity and aspiration (Mysore, 1991; Mofid 2013). In India religion has played an important role in defining nationalism. As Ashish Kumar suggests that nationalist leader used religion to mobilize the masses against British Empire for gaining independence.

Though the Indian brand of secularism did not advocate a complete separation of religion from the affairs of the state, religious politics was always regarded with suspicion, as being divisive and negative. Nevertheless, a growing participation of FBOs in the so-called 'secular spheres', such as education, health and community development has expanded manifold after independence, going beyond their involvement in welfare and charitable activities to strengthen their respective faith communities. Over the last six decades, it is observed that many of these religious institutions have moved out from their traditional spheres of operation of internal reforms and faith-based activities with their respective communities to public spheres or so called "secular spheres". Similarly, there has been historically, the evolution of approaches to their development interventions from 'charity' or 'works of mercy' to 'development' to 'justice', but these are complementary not exclusive approaches (see Heredia, 2008).

However, as Jodhka and Bora<sup>4</sup> observe that 'it is important to recognize the fact that faith-based development activity in a religiously plural society like India can be quite a contentious process, with some organizations pushing an exclusionary political agenda in the name of development'. In a multi-religious yet secular ethos, social engagements carried out by religious institutions are often seen with suspicion and

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<sup>3</sup> Jodhka, Surinder. 'Religion and development in India: an introduction in Religions and Development', Working Paper 10: *India: Some Reviews of Literature Related to Religions and Development*, Edited by the Religions and Development Research Programme University of Birmingham.

<sup>4</sup> Jodhka, Surinder and Pradyumna, Bora: 'Religions and Development', Working Paper 28: *Mapping Faith-based Development Activities in Contemporary Maharashtra, India*.



have negative connotations. As a result, the fact that democratic and liberative religious institutions can bring in a transformative environment in the communities in a context of diversity and pluralism is disregarded. As observed by Kashyap (2005)<sup>5</sup>, Western and Middle-East supported faith-based organisations are both looked upon with suspicion in India, and it is assumed that their main aim is to foster conversions and subvert local belief systems. Thus, he maintains ‘in case of natural calamities and disasters, that the role of faith-based organisations is most effective due to their missionary zeal, compassion and geographical reach.

In this context the paper attempts to examine development interventions of religious institutions in contemporary India through a case study of Caritas India and the development interventions undertaken by it in five major disaster-affected areas<sup>6</sup>. It examines how, although, as a Christian organization, Caritas India draws its inspiration from the Christian faith, it carries out the development interventions in multi-religious communities abiding by the principles of non-discrimination and non-exclusion for a societal change in contemporary India.

<sup>5</sup> Kashyap, Abhaya. ‘Religion, Politics, Conflict and Humanitarian Action: An Indian Perspective’, in the Proceedings of the Workshop *Religion, Politics, Conflict and Humanitarian Action Faith-Based Organisations as Political, Humanitarian or Religious Actors* May 18–19 2005, Geneva Switzerland. [http://graduateinstitute.ch/files/live/sites/iheid/files/sites/ccdp/shared/Docs/Religion,politics,conflict,humanitarianism\\_workshop%20proceedings.pdf](http://graduateinstitute.ch/files/live/sites/iheid/files/sites/ccdp/shared/Docs/Religion,politics,conflict,humanitarianism_workshop%20proceedings.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> The research title “Participatory assessment on the long-term impact of post-disaster LRRD programmes” was carried out in five states in India to obtain a critical scientific analysis of the impacts of different LRRD (Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development) activities within Indian Post Emergency Rehabilitation Programmes focusing on beneficiaries’ perceptions and satisfaction, with the aim to recommend priorities in the combination of different intervention strategies in future post-disaster programmes. I was part of the research team carrying out the assessment in Gujarat. The final outcomes were presented in Xavier, Joseph (2015) “Weaving Hopes after Disasters”, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi. The case study draws extensively from chapter 2 and 6 of the report. I am indebted to Indian Social Institute for the use of the report.



## 5. Caritas India: Religious Organization in Secular Spheres

Caritas India is a voluntary organization registered under the Societies Registration Act XXI 1860 (the Punjab Amendment Act 1957). It was founded in 1962 as the official development arm of the Catholic Church in India. Founded on Gospel values, especially the commandment of love, Caritas India endeavours to be a sign of God's love for the underprivileged and the marginalized. Caritas India is a member of Caritas International, a confederation of 168 Catholic relief and development organizations working in nearly 200 countries, the second-largest NGO network in the world (Xavier, 2015).

Driven by the commitment to uphold the dignity and sacredness of the human person, Caritas India has been working for the emancipation of the underprivileged and the marginalized irrespective of their sex, caste, ethnicity and religion. It has reached out to millions of the poor, assisting them overcome poverty and deprivation. It is widely present across the country and involves itself in a large spectrum of development interventions, mobilizing and investing funds. Caritas India started its work in disaster relief response, but over the decades, it has extended its activities to various socio-economic objectives, such as livelihood, natural resource management, sustainable agriculture, good governance, anti-trafficking of women and children, peace-building, and healthcare, with focus on HIV, malaria, TB and other communicable diseases.

Its work is facilitated through its association with an extensive network of social development organizations in India and at the international level. It has also been helping hundreds of development organizations increase their capacities to achieve greater levels of effectiveness. There is also an increasing effort by Caritas India to engage with the government in disaster responses.

### 5.1. Disaster Responses

As a case study, this article looks at the development interventions of Caritas India undertaken in five major disaster-affected areas and the impact they have made in people's life and behaviour over the last two decades: i) the super cyclone in Odisha in 1999 and floods in 2001 and 2003; ii) the earthquake in 2001 in the Bhuj area of Gujarat/Kutch;

iii) and iv) the tsunami in 2004 in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu; and v) the floods in Bihar in 2007 and 2008.

### *Odisha Super Cyclone (1999) and Floods (2001 and 2003)*

Odisha witnessed a series of major natural disasters in 1999. In October, in a span of eleven days, fourteen districts in the state were devastated by two cyclones. The second cyclone, 29-30 October, was the worst in meteorological history, with wind speeds recorded at 223 kmph. Lasting 24 hours, it swept the entire Odisha coast, affecting twelve districts and parts of neighbouring West Bengal, devastating a 250 km stretch of eastern Odisha's coast. About 10,000 people were reported killed. The super cyclone destroyed lives and life support systems in 15,420 villages, affecting 12.65 million people. There was loss of 4 lakh cattle; 17 lakh houses were demolished; and 12.5 lakh hectares of standing crop were damaged. In July 2001 and September 2003 there were floods in the state.

### *Bhuj Earthquake, 2001*

The Gujarat earthquake, one of world's worst earthquakes measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale which hit the State of Gujarat on 26 January 2001, killed over 20,000 people and 166,000 were injured, around 20,000 of them seriously. A total of 233 people were missing in Kutch. The Government of Gujarat estimated approximate economic losses of US\$ 4.5 billion. More than 10,000 small and medium industrial units stopped production due to damage caused to plants, factories and machinery. Work at thousands of salt pans stopped after the earthquake and many local crafts-persons died in the earthquake. Besides, most of them lost their houses, workshops and tools, facing bleak days ahead.

### *The Tsunami, 2004*

On 26 December 2004, mega tidal waves, called tsunami, which were a consequence of the massive earthquake near Sumatra Islands of Indonesia, hit India, Sri Lanka and Ache in Indonesia. In India, coastal Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Kerala and Andaman and Nicobar Islands experienced massive damage to lives, livelihoods and properties. It is estimated that more than 10 lakh people were directly or indirectly affected by the tsunami in Tamil Nadu alone. At least 7,995 people died

in the state; thousands of people were rendered homeless. Among the dead, the majority were women and children; 197 children were rendered orphans and 561 women were widowed. At least 85 people were killed and 810 were missing after tidal waves did havoc along the 1,000 km coastline of Andhra Pradesh.

### *Bihar Floods, 2007 and 2008*

The floods in 2007 in the state were designated as unprecedented in their intensity, unpredictability, seasonality in their timing, their spatial coverage, their successive spells, and their extended duration. 18 August 2008 was marked as Black Day for the people of north-eastern Bihar. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared this catastrophe as a “national calamity”. The Government of India claimed that 3.24 million people were affected by the floods; 69 people and 179 animals lost their lives. However, private sources claim that over 2,000 humans died.

### **5.2. Disaster Interventions**

As a front-ranking organization in the sector of relief response, rehabilitation and disaster preparedness, Caritas India has rendered its services whenever disasters struck the country. It has worked to deliver relief to people hit by disasters, such as the Bangladesh refugee crisis in 1971, to the Phailin cyclone (2013), Uttarakhand floods (2013), Kashmir floods (2014) and Hudhud cyclone (2014). Caritas India has continually moved on from one disaster response to another. Disaster intervention, as a humanitarian response, has been a key intervention of Caritas India for many years. Six major interventions were broadly undertaken, immediately for relief and thereafter continued for a longer duration for rehabilitation and development: a) Immediate and extended relief, b) Psycho-social support, c) Livelihood intervention, d) Housing, e) Community-based Disaster Preparedness (CBDP) programmes and f) Developmental Interventions.

#### *a) Immediate and extended relief*

In any disaster, the first contact is made through relief interventions. Caritas India has, over the years, developed a high level of expertise in relief interventions. Caritas India, through the network of its partner organizations spread all over India, has the ability to reach out to persons



in emergency need in the quickest possible time. Caritas enjoys a credible reputation in relief operations, among the NGOs and among government officials. For all disasters surveyed in this study, the undertone among the respondents, irrespective of religion, caste and sex, was that “the church organizations will reach us”.

#### *b) Psycho-social Interventions*

Caritas India’s Emergency and Disaster Management Policy, which evolved in 2013, points out that the ultimate goal of disaster interventions is to enable disaster-affected persons to live with dignity. This approach underlines the need for a focus on psycho-social interventions. Psycho-social interventions have been given importance by Caritas India whenever there was considerable loss of lives in a disaster. Some respondents considered the very presence of church agencies and their regular visits to the villages as highly strengthening and motivating.

#### *c) Livelihood Interventions*

Livelihood interventions have been one of the key engagements of Caritas India. The focus of Caritas India in livelihood interventions is twofold: regaining the traditional economic resource base and promoting new employability skills and opportunities. In all disasters, a substantial amount was invested in livelihood and income-generation activities to strengthen the economic base of the disaster-affected persons.

#### *d) Housing/ Shelter*

Caritas India, amidst various challenges in providing housing support, ranging from identification of “people served”, land, nature of the housing model, process and mode of carrying out the intervention, accessing support from government etc., has allocated 60 to 70 per cent of its budget to housing. Hence, from the finance point of view this intervention assumes greater significance than other interventions. Many “people served” noted that the tsunami and earthquake brought a big gift for them in the form of a house, which otherwise would not have been possible in their lifetime. Everyone stated that housing had given them identity and dignity and they already were into a new way of living and organizing their lives.

### *e) Disaster Preparedness*

Community-based/managed disaster preparedness (CBDP/CMDP) has been a key intervention of Caritas India in all these five study areas. The primary purpose of the CBDP programme is to generate high-quality awareness among the people of disaster-prone areas and organize the community to have minimum systems and structures in place so that in an emergency situation the community has skills and capacities to handle the situation and reduce losses at all levels. The result of CBDP intervention has actually been seen on the ground, the respondents expressing confidence that they would be able to protect themselves better if warned in a timely manner of an impending disaster.

### *f) Developmental Interventions*

What makes Caritas unique is its presence in communities before, during and after the crisis situation. The longstanding and durable presence of Caritas in every disaster relief programme has earned it a name, credibility and trust among the people, other NGOs and the government. Thus, the organization continues its engagement with the affected people for a period of time after the crisis situation is over. The other continued developmental interventions were: a) Women's Empowerment through SHGs and Micro-Finance, b) Socio-cultural interventions, c) Village Development interventions through welfare and development programmes, d) Community animation and e) Health and Education.

While Caritas India engages in disaster response from the humanitarian perspective, its ultimate objective is to facilitate disaster-affected persons to become citizens, claiming their due rights and entitlements from the State. During the course of its interventions Caritas has made several attempts to instil the concept among the people that the State is the primary duty bearer in disaster response. In all interventions, the participation of the local community has been given paramount importance. Caritas has also progressively transformed itself from being a charitable organization to a rights-based organization focusing on dignity of individuals, common good and citizenship.

### ***5.3. Satisfaction and Impact of the Major Interventions***

The major interventions were carried out in the affected areas with multi-religious communities irrespective of their sex, caste, ethnicity and religion. However, the majority of the respondents were economically very poor, socially backward, belonged to OBCs and SCs, were daily breadwinners, and were followers of Hinduism. Caritas India reached out to the most needy and vulnerable communities in all the disaster interventions taken up for this study. The majority of the respondents (93.5 per cent) stated that there had been considerable improvement in their socio-economic lives because of disaster interventions; the rest were either not sure whether their situation had improved or they were still struggling.

Satisfaction and impact are closely intertwined concepts in development interventions. Theoretically, satisfaction refers to fulfillment or gratification; and impact refers to the effect on the person in the long term (Xavier, 2015). In this study, satisfaction is the result of need, quality of the intervention and participation of the “people served” and the impact is seen as the effect on the “people served” in comparison to initial status of the person, after disaster. The study showed that in all interventions the impact score was higher than satisfaction, which is an indication that the interventions had a good effect on the “people served” in terms of bringing transformative changes.

## **6. Transforming Narratives:**

### **Substantial Changes after Interventions**

Disaster interventions facilitated a new life among the “people served” and promoted substantial changes in the social, economic and cultural aspects. The changes are visible in personal growth, relationship with others, quality of life, interaction with the outside world, collective bargaining, access to entitlements etc. Some of these narratives are captured here.

#### ***6.1. Personality-related Changes***

The “people served” exhibit a tremendous amount of self-confidence and are looking towards a better future. After having witnessed the



loss of many lives, many of them recognize the value of living a meaningful life here and now. One clear expression of this can be seen in the interest taken in educating the children. Most of the children of the respondents are in school today. The parents are willing to make sacrifices in order to educate their children. Virtually in every village, nearly all girls and boys go to school. In Bhuj, due to education of girls, child marriages, a common practice earlier, has drastically come down.

There were some focused interventions to instill human values, especially in Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Apart from educational support and motivation, children's parliament and children's panchayat concepts were tried out. These efforts have helped the children to understand their role in community building, especially in interacting and building relationships with all children, transcending caste and religion.

The women are more articulate today and empowered. Many success stories are attributed to women power. Before the earthquake in Gujarat, for example, women were restricted in their movements, and were not allowed to go out after sunset. Post-disaster and relief, the men even accompany the women to facilitate their participation in various common meetings. Vegiben Ahir, now a strong SHG leader from Kunneriya village, Gujarat, is an example of this empowerment. She took the initiative to convince her community, especially the poor, during the initial stage of earthquake interventions, when there was a lot of opposition from the villagers in joining the Caritas intervention. Her community members cautioned her that Caritas would make her eat meat, convert her children to Christianity etc. But she did not pay heed to their objections. Slowly, people came around to her views and began to trust Caritas.

The emergence of sensitive and service-oriented leadership is also seen especially among the women in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. A number of women, members of the SHGs, have contested the local elections and are elected as the sarpanchs. Certainly, the women themselves have perceived the change as one of the women of Kunneriya village said, "The interventions of LRRD over the years have given us an identity and have empowered women in many ways. We are not less than men and men have begun to respect us" (D'Souza, 2015).

Post-disaster, in many places it is the women who have come out in large numbers and have become symbols of leadership and entrepreneurship. Deviben Rabari, aged around 35 from the shepherd community of Bhujodi village, is an example. Deviben is now treasurer of Ashapura Mahila Mandal. She is also president of the village mahamandal (federation of the SHGs) and member of the Coordination Committee. Deviben says, "During the rehabilitation, Caritas promoted SHGs. Once the staff members explained the benefits of SHGs, I got interested in joining the mandal. However, at that time the women of our caste were very reluctant to join as they were hardly getting out of the house. I joined the group after one year or so. We started the SHG with 25 rupees saving per month. I was one of the "people served" of the animal support programme of Caritas through SHGs. I received two cows. I chose cows, because the Rabarissupply milk to the entire village. Over the years, I have taken the livelihood seriously and at present we have twelve cows, with the milk business flourishing. Earlier, my husband used to work as daily wage earner. Later, he started selling milk on his bicycle. Today he has a motorbike. Our economic conditions have improved considerably. The men of the village, who were earlier skeptical about the involvement of women in SHGs, now have complete faith and take part in our meetings and other activities. Support from other women and my husband have encouraged me to take up the role of a leader. Though I have studied up to 7<sup>th</sup> standard, I want my children to study and do well in life."

## ***6.2. Economy-related Changes***

Disaster interventions have also facilitated expansion of livelihood opportunities. While traditional occupations like agriculture, fishing and animal husbandry are continuing, new opportunities have expanded many possibilities and strengthened the economic base of the households. A new entrepreneurial spirit is also seen. Establishing china clay factories has opened up new business opportunities and big income for families in Nadappa, Bhuj. The families provide employment to others. In Bhujodi, the embroidery business has reached the international market. Livelihood intervention in Majnupur of Muzaffarpur was also a tremendous success. The livestock invested in Majnupur has contributed to the villagers making a dignified living out of selling milk.

In Kanyakumari district, there has been a drastic reduction in youth taking up fishing, opting instead for technical and professional city-based jobs such as engineering, nursing, lab technician, computer software and hardware etc. The youth are also taking an interest in learning multiple skills such as soap making, tailoring, embroidery, motor-mechanics, and so on. It is perceptibly clear that the new generation is looking for various job opportunities beyond the traditional occupations. The families desire to educate their children to enable them to move up the economic ladder.

For livelihood, the SHG formation initiated by Caritas in Soripur, Orissa, can be considered as a model. It has taken the form of a cooperative and has been recognized by the government. After the cyclone in 1999, Caritas started 35 SHGs in the village. The number has now increased to 100, out of which 48 groups are very active. Initially, they received Rs. 490,000 as a loan from Caritas to start small income generation activities. Loans were paid off within one or two years. The groups have now Rs. 34 lakh in their savings. The women say that now they do not require any loan from the bank and independently carry out their group activities. Multiple income generation activities have been initiated, such as incense making, chotua (seed powder), tailoring, bamboo work, rope making, betel leaf cultivation, fishery, mushroom cultivation etc. This has enabled the parents to educate their children. The women have also created a group for marketing. They have bought two vehicles to transport their goods. Their savings are also sufficient to provide loans to the farmers. Women SHGs also play a major role through internal money rotation and keeping the moneylenders out of the village.

Along with housing, Caritas India also provided common properties like overhead water tanks, classrooms, community halls and panchayat offices. Community halls are extensively used by the women to conduct SHG meetings. Children study here. Marriages and family celebrations are also organized there. While all this is taken care of by the local panchayat, a sense of collective ownership by the community makes them responsible to maintain them well. Income generated through renting out facilities is utilized to sustain and maintain the community halls. Common space has increased the participation of the community in village development activities.



### 6.3. *Socio-Cultural-related Changes*

Along with housing, resettlement locations have good streets and roads, kitchen gardens, drainage systems, drinking water facilities, and garbage disposal facility etc. Facilities like drainage and toilets are very new in the lives of the “people served”. In fact, building toilets within the house has broken some traditional notions and mindsets. For Suamulu, a widow from Pinnavaripallem, Andhra Pradesh, housing gave her a sense of security and confidence to leave her children at home and venture out for work. The young girls feel comfortable as they have enough privacy in the new house. Housing has helped the poor to regain their self-confidence as there is privacy, security and sufficient space around.

Concrete roofed stand-alone houses and two-floored houses are expressions of new narratives in the lives of the “people served”. Owning a house has raised the self-esteem and dignity of the people. Most of them stated that they cannot think of building a house. Owning a house is a big security and will benefit enormously the present and future generations for the next 25 to 30 years. Lourdummy from Bishop Leon Nagar, Tamil Nadu says, “The new atmosphere away from the coast gives them peace. The new village with good neighbours gives them the feeling of being born anew”. Housing, especially resettlements in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, have given a new concept of space among the “people served”. These families were living very close to the sea for centuries, in cramped and all-in-one houses, in unclean surroundings. Now they live in concrete houses with kitchen, bedroom, toilet, washing place etc. and have developed a new way of living. This space concept has also led them into a new vision of life.

Many women SHGs narrated success stories as expression of ‘women collective power’ with great joy. These groups have taken painstaking efforts to solve common problems of the villages such as construction of dilapidated bridges, solving drinking water problems, setting right street lights, increasing in public transportation facilities, common sanitation facilities, increased market access, development of schools, monitoring of the functioning of schools etc.

There is more sharing, transcending caste and religious boundaries. People of one religion or caste participate in the socio-cultural celebrations

of the others. An elderly gentleman in Bhuj said, "I have not seen any conflict or fight between communities for years. Caritas brought us more closely together. They united us." The same feelings were expressed by "people served" in coastal villages as well. Differences which led to fights to assert one's domination have progressively reduced. People across religion and caste have learnt to work together. This change is largely attributed to common living and eating during the relief phase.

A striking phenomenon is that addiction to alcohol has declined in some coastal villages in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. After tsunami interventions, while addiction has not stopped completely the number of people drinking in excess has reduced. Moreover, anyone creating a scene in public after drinking is looked down upon. This attitudinal change has indirectly forced many to give up drinking.

Disaster interventions have also fostered exposure and communication with the outside world. "We always remained in the village and the village was our world; it is only after the earthquake that we began to move around and see the outside world", says Ranchotbhai from Bhuj. People have come out of their traditional boundaries and have begun travelling to cities and towns exploring livelihood opportunities. There is also a huge change in the way people dress up as an affirmation of their self-respect. Particularly, the younger people dress up well to show to the outside world that they are equal to others.

#### ***6.4. Rights and Entitlement-related Changes***

These transformative narratives have radically changed prevalent patriarchal gender relations. Women also said that due to these changes women are respected in private family life and in public space. In Gujarat, a number of Muslim women have assumed leadership roles in SHGs. Many empowered women's groups are in direct contact with government offices and are knowledgeable about all available government schemes. They not only access these schemes for themselves but also guide others. Women say that some men envy women saying all that they could not get from the government for long is realized through the efforts of women. Women's narratives do confirm that concerted and purposeful interventions can turn tragedies and catastrophes in favour of socio-economic and cultural changes.

Nalsilva Kumar from Munger, Bihar says, "The DP/DRR committees formed in every village, apart from disaster preparedness engagements, also act as representative bodies of the villages. The members of the committees are trained to make people aware of their basic rights and privileges. These committees work not only during pre/post-floods but throughout the year. These committees are also linked to the local government bodies, NABARD and KrishiVikas Kendra. Initially it has been very difficult to make the community understand the aims of these committees. Gradually immense progress has been made which has resulted in a strong network-based now."

The last phase of disaster intervention was marked by an increasing number of activities on rights and entitlements as a fruit of the community animation process. Meeting government officers, submitting petitions, initiating campaigns, and dharnas and protests, where necessary, were activities carried out by the "people served". This change is mainly among the women who were animated through SHG formation. With the efforts of Caritas India, the "people served" have been capacitated to assert themselves as rights holders. However, there are serious sustainability concerns: already, defragmentation and non-functioning of these groups are visible.

It can be said that Caritas interventions have made deep impacts in the lives of the "people served", particularly among women. These have opened up new possibilities and opportunities to dream of an improved quality of life, individually and collectively. From the culture of blaming the past and living in the present with bitterness, the "people served" have been enabled to visualize a possible better future and are willing to do whatever they can to attain that future goal. Across all states, the people said: "The changes we have witnessed in our lives will benefit the future generation as well." A house can become a home, and a village can become a community. Caritas has always as a faith-inspired organization made efforts to focus all its interventions to build an inclusive society with a transformative paradigm.

## **7. Some Conclusions and Remarks**

Tracing the history of Indian nationalism, contemporary India, as the world's largest democracy, has witnessed different shades of

nationalisms. The process of the Indian nation in-the-making, has experienced struggles emanating from its pluralism and the various schools of thought that came with “competing ideologies and contrasting visions” (Aloysius, 1997). The diversity in the construction of Indian nationhood came from many contextual realities, prominent personalities and political calculations. Communalism, especially Hindu-Muslim relations, and the role played by sectarian parties like Muslim League and Hindu *Mahasabha* provided the defining texts in India’s nationhood. Gandhi’s religiosity and views on religion in politics and Nehru’s emphasis on secularism and his belief that religion had no role to play in India’s political life, remained domain of unease between the two in the Indian National Congress and played a critical role in defining nationhood and nationalism (see Desai, 2000).

The historical processes witnessed two predominant versions of nationalism developing in India - Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism. Hindu nationalism was rooted in the Hindu cultural revival and social reform movements of the nineteenth century; whereas Indian nationalism encompassed all Indian cultures and religions (Malik and Singh, 1995). However, the Indian Constitution that was drafted to give expression to the democratic aspirations of the people, was not the product of any single brand of Indian nationalism – that of the Indian National Congress, of the Hindu *Mahasabha* or of the Communist Party. The founding fathers envisaged ‘democratic nationalism’ as a way towards progress and development for modern India, strongly based on the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice (Bhattacharya, 2016).

In recent times, the debate on nationalism has exposed not only that the term is contested but contrary outlooks and standpoints on nationalism have brought in divisions. Our diversities are now seen as differences and those who are different do not fit into the nationalism that is dictated more by a single narrative of religious nationalism or that emanates from majoritarian homogeneity. The ‘idea of India’ cherished for ages is being challenged. The idea of a ‘monocultural nation state’ is contrary to the idea of India that holds at its core the ethos of pluralism and diversity. Tagore had declared, “... the unity of



India has been and shall always be a unity in diversity” (Nandy, 1994). The attempts in contemporary India by the forces of homogenization to see India from the prism of religious nationalism destroy the heart of a nation that has her identity intimately related to multi-religious, multi-cultural and plural characteristics.

Thus, religion as a faith or an ideology has become a central question in today’s context of religious fundamentalism and nationalism. The vast majority of the followers see their religion as a faith and not an ideology; however, some sections choose to make their religion an ideology. When religion as an ideology provides basis for political action to gain political power it becomes a negative factor, bringing in war and conflict, division and hatred and human rights violations in society. Religion turns into a great divider of people. It builds boundaries instead of bridges. Religious fundamentalism and nationalism draw their ideology from religion that plays politics of identity based on religion.

On the other hand, religion as faith inspires its followers to contribute to the common good, bringing peace and progress, harmony and unity, respecting religious pluralism in society. Thus, faith develops as a liberating force that provides common ground for dialogue with other religions and collective action. Hence, religion comes with a promise of societal transformation.

The transforming narratives presented in the case study confirm that how concerted and purposeful interventions by religious organizations can transform tragedies and catastrophes into opportunities for socio-economic and cultural development. The narratives reaffirm that when democratic and liberative institutions intervene, based on their faith perspective with a non-discriminatory and non-exclusionary approach religion begins to transcend, provide legitimate space for vulnerable and marginalised people to participate in socio-economic and political processes that could transform their lives.

The case study represents hundreds of religious institutions drawing inspiration from their respective faiths which contribute to the plural, democratic and secular ethos of India across cultures and contexts for

humanity and its progress.<sup>7</sup> Where religion as an ideology is used for political agenda by some sections to divide the nation, religion as a faith could become instrumental for a dialogue with cultures and religions for a societal change in contemporary India. Thus, democratic and liberative religious institutions should be encouraged to bring a transformative environment in the communities in a context of diversity and pluralism instead of viewing them with suspicion and attributing negative connotations.

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<sup>7</sup> Just for an example, in India Christian faith-based organisations are regarded as the most effective in terms of their impact and acceptability to society at large. According to the survey conducted by CRI ...CBCI...

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# **The Ramakrishna Mutt and Mission: Its Social Engagements**

**N. Umamaheswari**

The article presents extensively the Vedantic principles and guidelines that motivated Sri Ramakrishna Mutt and Mission to carry on its social engagements with a spiritual will. The author takes the example of the Salem Mutt and Mission and describes its various activities. Dr. N. Uma Maheswari is a Sanskrit scholar and has been interested in conducting programs for spoken Sanskrit and has organized five National Sanskrit seminars. She is currently associated with Ramakrishna Mutt, Chennai and Salem. (umasanskrit14@gmail.com)

Ramakrishna mutt was established in September 1866, within two months of passing away of Sri Rama Krishna in Calcutta. After starting the Mutt, Swami Vivekananda began to feel the need of another organization which would run on the same lines as the Mutt, but would stress spiritual mental and material service to all - in and outside India. The Ramakrishna Mission as a religious organization was formally established in Calcutta on 1st May, 1897 by the lay and monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.

Swami Mumukshananda writes, "It must be borne in mind that the genesis of these two organizations has to be studied jointly, and not separately, since from the very start they both have been inseparably interlinked and both stemmed from the same source, the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna. The ideals of both these organizations are like the two faces of the same coin. The programmes and activities of both are controlled and supervised by the monks of the Ramakrishna Order who are dedicated to the same ideals."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mumukshananda, "The genesis of Ramakrishna Mission," pp 210 (Reference numbers 1 to 24 are taken from the articles contributed by



This twin organizations working under and managed by the same monastic disciples of Ramakrishna Order, is unique in many ways. Though India is a land of spirituality and renunciation and many great Acharyas have shown the path of self-realization to humanity, they were all restricting themselves mostly to their immediate disciple-group and did not work in a big organized way. But, striking a balance between detachment and ‘attached detachment’ was a great task for the monks of Ramakrishna Order since there was no precedence in spiritual history. Hence, the example set by these monks is all the more effective because though they have denounced the world, they have not withdrawn from it.

The mental preparations must have called for a new form of self-discipline. There could be no dilution of the monastic ideal, no relaxation of the ascetic regime, but wide ranging social interaction in the course of humanitarian service necessarily entailed frequent exposure to different ways of life. But, in its public activities and internal working, the Rama Krishna mission has demonstrated what can be achieved by selfless dedication, mature judgment and total integrity. The commendable nature lies in striking a perfect balance between spiritual upliftment of the self and social upliftment without any compromise. It is said, ‘The order has remained true to its spiritual core in the midst of its continually expanding engagement with the affairs of the contemporary world. Its ascetic discipline has not lost its strength or validity under the so called pressure of changing times; the alleged pressure is an unworthy excuse for a dilution of unchangeable principles’. Sri Rama Krishna explains this as, “Tortoise swims here and there in water. But, do you know where its mind would be? It is always on its eggs on the shore. Similarly do all your social duties but keep your mind and focus on God.”<sup>2</sup>

The source of the ideology or the ideals of these twin organizations is Sri Ramakrishna’s life of sadhana, his spiritual realization and

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various authors and compiled in a book under the title, *The story of Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Vivekananda’s vision and Fulfilment*, Kolkatta: Advaita Ashrama, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Sri Ramakrishna, *Amudha Mozhigal Thirattu*

revelations he experienced. He said, "If God can be worshipped through an image why shouldn't it be possible to worship Him through a living person? Does God exist only when the eyes are closed and cease to exist when the eyes are opened?"<sup>3</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna himself resolved the question by expounding his wonderful doctrine of service to men as worship of God. Few instances may be quoted here to strengthen this point.

1. Personification of Love and service to others,<sup>4</sup> Sri Rama Krishna once scolded Narendra (Purvashrama name of Swami Vivekananda) for his desire to remain constantly absorbed in Nirvikalpa Samadhi and asked him to work for the removal of world's misery.
2. He entailed Mother Sarada Devi, to continue to work to uplift the world, even after he casts off his mortal body.<sup>5</sup>
3. Once Sri Ramakrishna went into Samadhi and after partially regaining his consciousness told his devotees, "you talk of compassion for beings? Insignificant creatures that you are, how can you show compassion to beings? No it is not compassion to Jivas but service to them as Shiva. Serving all beings looking upon them as God."<sup>6</sup>

Following Sri Ramakrishna's life, members of the Ramakrishna Order attempt to lead their lives for their own liberation and also to work for the welfare of others, *Aatmanomokshartham jagaddhitayaca*, which forms the motto of the Mutt and the Mission. In serving humanity, the Vedantic way, that is, 'serving without any discrimination' was adopted.

### What is Vedanta?

Fifteenth century Christian mystical and humanistic writer Giovanni Mirandola stated, "Philosophy seeks the truth; theology finds it and

<sup>3</sup> Shiv Shankar Chakraborty, *Ramakrishna Mission and the uplift of Indian Masses*, pp 572

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp 212

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp 213

religion possesses it". Vedanta may be said to have performed all the three acts of seeking, finding and possessing the Truth.

If we look at major religions of the world, we will know that they would have crossed many hurdles, many obstacles before reaching its present stage. While many other religions, it may be said, would have either suppressed or destroyed other existing religions and cultures, it is not the case of Hinduism, known as Sanatana Dharma, Perennial Religion. Sanatana dharma has in fact taken the best elements of other religions and cultures too in its onward flow.

There were many philosophies of Sanatana dharma, and all these have been absorbed by Vedanta, the only surviving philosophy. The reason and the secret of survival of this Vedanta is that it is not studied or read as something different from Religion. This philosophy is intertwined in each and every act of Sanatana dharma, and that it has been internalized by every Hindu. In other words, it has become a way of thinking, way of life. Just as many tributaries would join the main stream making it wider and broader, so also many philosophies, having had their independent flow for some time, joined the main stream Vedanta. Buddhism too, considered as an offshoot of Hinduism, having had its origin in the Sanatanadharma, was flowing separately but parallel to Vedanta for many years, was ultimately integrated into the mainstream Vedanta by Jagadguru Sri Adi Shankara.

To know and understand the reason why it is considered as the only tool to elevate human beings to the highest level without any discrimination whatsoever, and why is it wholeheartedly propagated by spiritual gurus like Sri Rama Krishna, Ma Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Mata Amritanandamayi, etc., we might go slightly deep into the governing principles of this philosophy.

Vedanta or the last portion of the Vedas namely Upanishads speak about the nature of Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. So the truth contained in the Upanishadic statements is known as Brahma Vidya. Some passages in the Upanishads speak about the identity of the Individual soul Atman with the Supreme Being Paramatma... 'Tattvamasi' 'Ayamatma Brahma' etc. But there are other passages which seemingly speak about the difference between the individual soul, God



and matter. To avoid confusion arising out of such seeming contradiction, Badarayana wrote Brahmasutras wherein he clearly establishes the unity of Atman and Brahman. Many Acharyas wrote commentaries on the Brahma sutras from their points of view, which gave birth to various schools of Vedanta namely, Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita, and so on. Nonetheless, all these schools accept the basic concept of Vedanta.

The most fundamental and unique principle of Vedanta is that the Ultimate Reality is of the nature of pure consciousness, which is self-existent and infinite.<sup>7</sup> In other systems of thought, consciousness is regarded as an attribute of the mind. Consciousness is independent of the mind and matter.<sup>8</sup> Pure consciousness is the true Self or Atman. All forms of individual consciousness are parts of One Supreme, infinite consciousness known as Brahman or Paramatma. Brahman is the material cause and the instrumental cause of the Universe.

As regards human destiny it is said that man's life on earth is in a state of bondage; he is subjected to many cycles of birth and death. The reason for this bondage is the ignorance about true nature of Atman. Once this is realized, he is liberated from this cycle. This is known as Mukti or Moksha and this is the ultimate goal of every human life.

Mukti is attainment of unity with Brahman and experiencing boundless eternal bliss.<sup>9</sup> To attain Mukti, man has to exhaust his residual karma. This is possible by three margas namely jnanamarga, bhakti marga and karma marga. Each marga has many spiritual disciplines known as Yoga namely Karma yoga, Bhakti yoga and jnana yoga (Raja yoga many times is brought under jnana or bhakti).

Other traditions hold the view that a man's immoral action will be treated as disobedience to God and he will be duly punished by Him. In Indian tradition of Vedanta, for man's immoral action against the Universal Order, Rta, retribution is brought about by the Law of Karma.

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<sup>7</sup> Swami Bhajanananda, *Vedanta - the philosophical basics of the Ramakrishna Movement*, pp 873

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp 874-9

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 881

Other religions like Christianity attribute the cause of immorality to the original sin of Adam and Eve and to the work of Satan, the Devil. But Vedanta traces the cause of immorality to one's samskara, which in turn is derived from one's own deeds and misdeeds done in previous births.

Vedanta stresses the need for giving back to the Universe from where originally things were received. And this is termed as Yajna or sacrifice. This is a cycle. This is best explained in the verses of Gita (Ch. III 14-15) thus, "All beings are evolved from food; production of food is dependent of rain; rain ensues from sacrifice; and sacrifice is rooted in prescribed action. Know that prescribed action has its origin in the Vedas, and the Vedas proceed from the Indestructible (God). Hence all-pervading Infinite is always present in sacrifice."<sup>10</sup>

The Law of Karma accounts for all the experiences - good or bad - a man undergoes in this life, as the fruits of good or bad action done by him in the previous life (lives). And his action in present life would largely determine his life style in the next birth; thus making him solely responsible for all his actions. If properly understood it makes a person responsible and more matured to face any situation in life. These namely Rta, samskara, yajna and karma are the core principles forming the ethical code of Vedanta.

Swami Vivekananda, having Sri Ramakrishna's life and experience as his message and guiding spirit, freed Vedanta from the clutches of orthodox Hinduism and made it a Universal Religion.

And the following principles of Vedanta<sup>11</sup> are highlighted:

- « Every soul is potentially divine
- « Direct experience of the Ultimate Reality is the Ultimate goal of life.
- « Service to man is Service to God
- « All life is sacred; everyone should be treated with respect.

<sup>10</sup> *Bhagavad Gita*: 3.14-15

<sup>11</sup> Swami Bhajananda, *Vedanta - the philosophical basics of the Ramakrishna Movement*, pp. 890, 891

- « Synthesis of all four yogas- jnana, bhakti, karma and Raja may be practiced as a means to attain Mukti or any one yoga individually.
- « Ultimate Reality is One; but known it by different names.<sup>12</sup>
- « As many faiths, so many paths<sup>13</sup>
- « Everyone should stick to his own path but should honour and accept some of the best elements of other religions.
- « All souls are equal and are one in the Supreme Self, distinction on any basis is not possible.

Though the principle of Vedanta advocated oneness of Atman and Brahman, practical application had to face challenges. Swami Vivekananda said, “selfishness is the root cause of all evil and thus sacrifice and service to others especially poor and needy is the natural way of life”.

With these dynamic principles of Vedanta Swami Vivekananda went to participate in the Parliament of Religions and conquered the hearts of West.

### **Spectrum of activities of Ramakrishna Mutt and Mission**

Swami Vivekananda was of the opinion that if India can offer spiritual education to the world, we can also receive scientific and technological knowledge from them. His heart was filled with compassion when he saw the lifestyle of the west and simultaneously remembering the pitiable condition of many of his fellow countrymen. After his visit to the west, Swamiji fully realized the importance and effectiveness of organized way of working and started that in India.

### **Swamiji's Vision of the uplift of the masses**

Shiv Shankar Chakraborty writes, “The Ramakrishna Mission's programmes for mass uplift can be classified into the following categories:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Swami Mumukshananda, *The Genesis of Ramakrishna Mission*, pp. 213

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 213

<sup>14</sup> Shiv Shankar Chakraborty, *Ramakrishna Mission and the uplift of Indian Masses*, p. 575



- « Spiritual and cultural services
- « Rural development
- « Tribal development
- « Education for the masses
- « Medical services
- « Relief and rehabilitation work

The rest of this paper attempts to show how various welfare measures were introduced by Swamiji then, and how they are being followed successfully by the Mutt and the Mission and all the private ashramas now. Special reference is given here to the activities of Sri Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Salem.

Swami Vivekananda thought that uplifting masses would be complete only through imparting spiritual ideas. A person should be emotionally, physically, economically and spiritually strong to face the challenges of the world. He was very keen that 'liberal attitude' and 'economic freedom' should in no way affect the moral fiber of the society, our culture and tradition. How to serve the masses? Sri Ramakrishna and Ma Sarada Devi themselves showed Swamiji and other disciples the way of doing service to the masses in their life time. *Isha Upanishad*<sup>15</sup> says, Always by doing works one should wish to live here for a hundred years. There is no way other than this by which actions do not cling to you."

Once while Sri Ramakrishna was on his way to Kashi and Brindavan with his disciples Mathur and others, passed through a small village near Vaidyanath. Seeing the deplorable living condition of the village people, his heart was filled with unprecedented compassion and tears running down from his eyes incessantly. He declared, unless and until food, water and clothing were provided to the villagers, he would not stir from that place and he was even ready to stay with them. He moved away from that village reluctantly, only when their needs were fulfilled.

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<sup>15</sup> *Isha Upanishad* 2

Sri Sarada Devi, at the age of 11, spent all the grains stored in the reserve, cooked khichdi and served the poor and hungry, when famine broke out in her birth place, Jayrambati. She said she would fan the leaves after Khichdi was served with both her hands, because it would cool down faster and they could eat without delay.

“If poor cannot come to education, education must go to them.”<sup>16</sup> with this idea in mind, education was given to the masses. Swamiji was of the opinion that spiritual idealism of oriental knowledge coupled with materialistic practicality of western science, inner realization and outer perception need to be successfully blended for the ‘good of the many; for the happiness of the many’ - *bahujanahitayabahujanasukhaya*. He said this syllabus was needed to create a complete human being who is fully developed in heart, head and hand. As per this vision of Swamiji, Ramakrishna Mission institutions started dissemination of knowledge to all in India. Ramakrishna Mission started many primary schools, special schools in rural areas, colleges, schools for Tribal children etc for imparting formal education to the masses. Apart from formal education, value education programs, cultural and social activities are also organised. Now in India....primary schools, ....Higher secondary schools ..colleges are run by the Mutt and Mission. Few lakh students are benefitted every year through these institutions.

Under the ideal ‘Service to humanity is service to God’ ‘Daridra Narayana’ many related programs also are organized. Regular study circles, special tuition centres, work camps, supply of religious and cultural books to village people through mobile library scheme, adult education programs, vocational training, self-help group for women, medical camps are periodically organized. Apart from the Mutt and the Mission, there are many private Ashramas started by common men inspired by the teachings of the holy trio. These ashramas also engage themselves in various socio-cultural, religious and educational

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<sup>16</sup> Swami Atmapriyananda, *Ramakrishna Mission in the field of Education* p. 606

activities, with proper advice and guidance from Mutt. Swami Yatananda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Salem is the Head and chief advisor for all the private ashramas in Tamil Nadu.

Rural development programme started as early as 1894, by one of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Akhandananda. On seeing the ignorance, illiteracy and superstitions in some of the remote villages of Rajasthan, he was very moved and sought guidance and permission from Swami Vivekananda, to help them. Swamiji replies, "The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted - let these be your God. Go to villages from time to time, and teach them the arts of life as well as religion."<sup>17</sup> Taking advice from Swamiji, Swami Akhandananda adopted the village in Khetri, went door to door and requested the parents to send their children to the school started by him for the purpose of educating the villagers with the small fund donated by the Raja of Khetri. He tried to remove their ignorance and superstitions and slowly brought them to the mainstream of national life.

Monks thus engaged themselves not only in educating the poor villagers, but also indulged in many rehabilitation programs. For example, in 1927, Swami Sambhavananda<sup>18</sup> initiated welfare work for the Coorg people of Mysore, Karnataka. He wanted to enhance the economic condition of these people who were mainly collecting honey from the forests. He could observe that the method of honey collection was very old and not scientific too. So he taught them a new method which came to be known as 'Coorg Standard Hive' and also formed 'Honey producers' cooperative so that they would be suitably rewarded for their hard work of honey collection.

Many other programs were introduced by the Mutt and Mission to improve income of villagers and to raise their economic condition and for the welfare of tribals. For lack of space we have to omit it.

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<sup>17</sup> Shiv Shankar Chakraborty, *Ramakrishna Mission and the uplift of Indian Masses*, p. 579

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 579



## Relief and rehabilitation work

In the year 1897, Swami Akhandananda,<sup>19</sup> though penniless wandering monk, could not bear the helplessness of the villagers in the Murshidabad district, because of severe famine. He wrote three letters to Swami Premananda at Alam Bazar for help. Swami Vivekananda on reading those letters sent two monastic workers and Rs. 150/- This was the first relief work in the history of Ramakrishna Mission. It is said that though people were skeptical about ochre robed monks working at the sites, slowly they accepted their help and local people too extended helping hand.

In the year 1898, when plague broke out in Calcutta and people refused to take vaccination because of the rumor that British Government was secretly planning to kill them, it was Swami Vivekananda who printed a 'hand bill' explaining the situation, cautioning people and assuring them of help from the monks of Ramakrishna Order at any time.<sup>20</sup> And in the year 1899, When plague broke out, Sister Nivedita managed the entire relief work operation with the help of other monks and devotees. Every relief operation was well documented and every paisa spent was well accounted. Not only relief operations but rehabilitation of the worst affected people also was taken care of.

The Mutt and the Mission are successfully carrying out these and more activities till today. The paper will now highlight some of the activities done by Sri Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Salem in the year 2015-2016.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Salem,<sup>21</sup> is a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission with its Headquarter at Belur Mutt, West Bengal. It is one of the oldest centres in the south, having its foundation laid in the year 1919 and the very same year activities also were commenced.

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<sup>19</sup> Swami Muktinathananda, *Ramakrishna Mission's Relief and Rehabilitation Services*, p. 654

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 658

<sup>21</sup> *Annual report 2014-15, 2015-16*, Salem: Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama

**\*Celebrations**

**Number of participants**

Kalpataru day and Sarada Devi Jayanti	Jan 1st 2016	1100
Sri Ramakrishna Jayanti	10th March	920
Swami Vivekananda Jayanti	31st Jan 2016	870
Navaratri celebration	13 to 23 Oct, 2015	1905
Viajayadasami and Shanti Jal	23rd Oct, 2016	500
National Youth Day	Jan 12, 2016	750

**\*Annual literary competitions**

Inter school competitions, Recitation, Essay writing, Oratory, Drawing, Gita recitation, Devotional music, Quiz, 1720 students from 36 schools participated.

National youth day celebration-2016

600 school and college students and Teachers and 150 common people attended.

Mission arranged Special lectures on Sri Sankara Jayanti, Sri Ramanuja Jayanti, Ramakrishna Foundation day, Buddha Purnima, and Sri Guru Purnima.

Half a day spiritual retreat was conducted for devotees and general public.

Weekend lectures for an hour's duration each on various subjects from religious scriptures are delivered by eminent scholars throughout the year.

**Educational and cultural**

Comprehensive value education programs for school and college students in and around Salem are arranged. Total 1745 students are benefitted

Value education Books obtained from Belur Mutt and distributed to the participants.

Free tuition centre is run by the Mission from the year 2001.

162 school children and 3 college students are given free tuition classes. Special teachers are appointed by the Mission for this purpose. Students are given clothes on festive occasions, milk and food every day before the class, and their school and college fee expenditure is completely borne by the Mission.

Students are given training in vocal music, Tabla ,Harmonium and Dance.

Special computer training is given at tuition centre

Bala Sangha: Free Sunday program for the children of the age group of 7 to 12 from 9.30am to 12.30. Bhajan, Yoga and story-telling classes are conducted

### **Health and Hygiene**

Mission runs a charitable dispensary which was started in the year 1933.

Free Multi grain Kanji (a traditional health drink) is provided to the patients daily.

Villages near Salem are identified and free mobile medical camps are organized twice a month.

Special eye camp is organized and free check up is provided. Eye operations done and glasses provided.

### **Welfare activities**

Vidyadana scholarship to 72 students, amounting to Rs. 143, 290 given to deserving poor students.

Buttermilk distributed to common people during peak summer months.

New clothes were given (Rs. 62,000) to the inmates of Government Rehabilitation Homes (Leprosy) at Sellampatty. Provisions for a month were given to them on Deepavali day.

Mission collected Rs. 1,123,602 for Nepal Earthquake Relief 2015, and sent to Belur Mutt for distribution.



Tailoring Unit for Women started in the year 2010 at Taramangalam and Mecheri. Special teachers were appointed to teach.

Swami Vivekananda was very much aware of the role of media in making things known to the common man. So that public will come forward to generously donate for the good cause the monks are striving. He started an English journal *Brahmavadin* which is now published bearing the title Vedanta Kesari. Another Tamil journal published is *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam*. Both these journals that are now being published from Chennai Mutt do wonderful service to humanity.

It is seen how tirelessly and selflessly the Ramakrishna Mutt and the Mission keep the fire of service lit by the holy trio burning till today. This is done without any discrimination of caste, creed, race or religion and after taking great care that Indian traditional values and systems are never compromised. The service will continue till every single soul on earth realizes its potential, its divinity and its oneness with Brahman as per the ideals of Vedanta: 'Serving humanity is serving God'. The monastic disciples of the Mission and the Mutt relentlessly serve the society upholding the statement of Isa Upanishad, earlier mentioned. (see Notes 15)

## Books Referred

1. *The story of Ramakrishna Mission - Swami Vivekananda's vision and fulfillment*, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006
2. *A short history of Sanskrit Literature*, T.K. Ramachandra Aiyar, Palghat: R.S. Vadhyar & sons, 1998.
3. *The Bhagavad Gita*, Gorakhpur: Gita Press
4. *Annual Report 2014-15, 2015-16*, Salem: Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama
5. *150th Birth Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda 1863-2013*, Salem: Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama

# **Prison Ministry India (PMI) and the Rehabilitation of Prisoners**

**M. Jeyanthi**

The prison service tries to reform and rehabilitate the prisoners to lead normal lives when they leave prison. The article presents how *Prison Ministry India* by themselves as well as collaborating with many organizations equipped the prisoners to face the challenges of society in their rehabilitation process, analysing the support systems. Dr. Ms. M. Jeyanthi is a Counselling Psychologist working in the Palayamkottai Prison, Palayamkottai. Earlier she served in the Department of Philosophy, Arul Anandar College, Karumathur, Madurai Dt. <jeycouns@gmail.com>

## **Introduction**

The Tamil Nadu Prison Manual defines ‘Prisoner’ as any person duly committed to custody under the writ, warrant or order of any court or competent authority exercising criminal or civil or revenue jurisdiction including any of the houses of parliament or state legislature.<sup>1</sup> “Prisoner” is a legal term for a person who is imprisoned which means any person for the time being in a prison as a result of any requirement imposed by a court or otherwise that he be detained in legal custody.<sup>2</sup> A prisoner is also known as an inmate who is deprived of liberty against his/her will. A person held in custody, captivity, or a condition of forcible restraint, especially while on trial or serving a prison sentence in prison.<sup>3</sup> A prison sentence, involving physical removal from the community and is also punishment. The deprivation of liberty and the removal of many choices about daily life during a prison sentence are seen to be

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tamil Nadu Prison Manual*, Government of Tamil Nadu, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prison Security Act 1992*, section 1(6)

<sup>3</sup> “Prisoner - Definition from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary”

the proportionate response by the sentencer to the actions of those convicted of serious crimes.

Prisonization is socialization that involves ‘a slow, gradual more or less unconscious process during which a person learns enough of the culture of a social unit into which he is placed to make him to characterize of it’. It can be described as a process whereby newly institutionalized offenders come to accept prison lifestyles and criminal values. It involves both enculturation into the inmate subculture and the process of deculturation that strips inmates of prior identities<sup>4</sup>. The inmates are shaped and transformed by the institutional environments in which they live. The process of prisonization involves the incorporation of the norms of prison life into one’s habits of thinking, feeling, and acting. Penal institutions require inmates to relinquish the freedom and autonomy to make their own choices and decisions and this process requires what is a painful adjustment for most people. They force them to adapt to an elaborate network of typically very clear boundaries and limits, immerse them so deeply in a network of rules and regulations. Due to prisonization people have to depend on external constraints and they gradually lose the capacity to rely on internal restrictions and self-imposed personal limits to guide their actions and restrain their constraints.<sup>5</sup>

## Objectives of incarceration

The aim/objective of prisonization/incarceration is reformation, rehabilitation and re-integration. Reformation of Prison inmate means correcting, educating, re-orientating and rehabilitating the inmates so that they could become better citizens when released from the prison. Reformation can only be achieved through education and training. Education brings positive changes and is a key to successful reentry into society that most inmates are lacking. Non-formal education in the prisons utilizes both formal and non-formal teaching approaches,

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<sup>4</sup> Clemmer, D. (1940), *The Prison Community*, Boston: Christopher. Pp 298-299.

<sup>5</sup> Garland, D. (1985), *Punishment and Welfare: A History of Penal Strategies*, Aldershot: Gower

with possibilities to attend literacy classes, continue with primary or secondary education, access vocational training and take part in workshops, groups, and so on. Activities are planned and carried out with the intention of supporting the development of skills, encouraging group communication and reforming the outlook and social behaviour of the imprisoned people. Rehabilitation is 'the action of restoring something to a previous (proper) condition or status'. So, rehabilitation is 1) an action that 2) restores 3) for the better.<sup>6</sup> According to Hudson, the objective of reform or rehabilitation is to reintegrate the offender into society after a period of punishment, and to design the content of the punishment so as to achieve this.<sup>7</sup>

The objectives of prisonization are achieved with the help/support of Non-Governmental Organizations. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are institutions, recognized by governments as non-profit or welfare oriented, played a critical role in promoting and facilitating health and educational activities in prisons.<sup>8</sup> There are many NGOs working for the rehabilitation prisoners, reintegration into society and welfare of their family. Among them Prison Ministry India (PMI) the Catholic prison apostolate is the biggest organizations working all over India having units of volunteers connected with every prison locally and run rehabilitation centers. NGOs' participation is mainly concentrated in the field of education, vocation, counselling and welfare activities.

### **Psycho-social effects of imprisonment**

The psychological effects of incarceration vary from individual to individual and not everyone who is incarcerated is disabled or psychologically harmed by it. But few people are completely unchanged or unscathed by the experience. The adaptation to imprisonment is

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<sup>6</sup> Raynor, P. and Robinson, G. (2009), *Rehabilitation, Crime and Justice*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>7</sup> Hudson, B. (2003), *Understanding Justice*. (2nd edition), Buckingham: Open University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Clement I. Imhabekhai, *Journal of Correctional Education* (1974-) Vol. 53, No. 4 (December 2002), pp. 150-153



almost always difficult. Because imprisonment necessitates a substantial curtailment of an individual's freedom and many other basic rights, deprivation is an inherent feature of being incarcerated.<sup>9</sup> When people first enter prison, their basic privacy rights are denied and lose control over routine aspects of their life. They are cut off from the family, friends, job, community and so forth. They find that they are being forced to adapt to an often harsh and rigid institutional routine, deprived of privacy and liberty, and subjected to a diminished, stigmatized status and extremely sparse material conditions is stressful, unpleasant, and difficult. They have to live in small, sometimes deteriorating spaces allotted by the officials (have little or no control over the identity of the person with whom they must share that space) and have no choice over food (when or what they may eat), sleeping time (when they must get up or go to bed). Everything is controlled by others.<sup>10</sup> The degraded conditions repeatedly remind them of their compromised social status and stigmatized social role as prisoners and some feel infantilized. A number replaces the inmate's name. All other social roles (e.g., father, son, husband, wife, brother, worker, etc.) become subordinate to that of the convict. Due to this a diminished sense of self-worth and personal value may result.<sup>11</sup>

Loneliness is a next prominent feature in a long-termers' life. S/he wakes with it and beds with it. Some adjust to the prison stress by leading isolated lives of quiet desperation and find safety in social invisibility by becoming as inconspicuous and unobtrusively disconnected from others as possible. This is a form of self-imposed

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Clemmer, *The Prison Community* (1940).

<sup>10</sup> Hanna Levenson, "Multidimensional Locus of Control in Prison Inmates," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 5, 342 (1975) who found not surprisingly that prisoners who were incarcerated for longer periods of time and those who were punished more frequently by being placed in solitary confinement were more likely to believe that their world was controlled by "powerful others." Such beliefs are consistent with an institutional adaptation that undermines autonomy and self-initiative.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Keve, *Prison Life and Human Worth*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press (1974)

social withdrawal. It can lead to mental depression that is marked by sadness, inactivity, difficulty in thinking and concentration, to a significant increase or decrease in appetite and time spent for sleeping, to feelings of dejection and hopelessness, and sometimes to suicidal tendencies. Taylor wrote that the long-term prisoner "shows a flatness of response which resembles slow, automatic behavior of a very limited kind, and he is humorless and lethargic."<sup>12</sup>

Prisoners and their families experience a tremendous sense of loss when incarceration occurs and that loss is compounded when children are involved. The protection, care, and nurture of prisoners' children are a primary concern of prisoners and their families. There is a marked physical absence of men and father figures in the daily lives of prisoner's children as women carry the primary, and often sole, responsibility for caregiving for the children of both imprisoned men and women. The impact of incarceration on families has been conceptualized as a form of family crises<sup>13</sup> (Fishman, 1990), loss and demoralization<sup>14</sup> (Schneller, 1976) and victimization of children<sup>15</sup> (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993). Most families experience financial losses as a result of parental incarceration and the loss are greatest for those families where the breadwinner is a daily wage labourer. The spouse is in the position to maintain the household, legal fees associated with criminal defense and appeals, the costs associated with maintaining contact during imprisonment and the costs of maintaining the prisoner while he is in prison.

Prisoner's children and families must also deal with feelings of shame and social stigma. Many family members do not tell even their closest

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, A., "Social Isolation and Imprisonment," *Psychiatry*, 24, 373 (1961), at p. 373.

<sup>13</sup> Fishman, L. T. (1990), *Women at the wall: A study of prisoners wives doing time on the outside*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

<sup>14</sup> Schneller, D. P. (1976), *The prisoners family: A study of the effects of imprisonment on the families of prisoners*. San Francisco: R and E Research Associates.

<sup>15</sup> Bloom, B., & Steinhart, D. (1993), *Why punish the children? A reappraisal of the children of incarcerated mothers in America*. San Francisco: National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

friends about a relative's incarceration and go to great lengths to protect the prisoner's children from the consequences of revealing this family secret. Some parents in prison have limited contact with their children and rely on relatives and friends for information about their children. Difficulties in adjusting to separation and loss has led to depression and other mental health problems among prisoners and their families.

Skyes observed that due to incarceration they are deprived of liberty, autonomy, personal security and heterosexual relations.<sup>16</sup> From the experience of researcher and from the prison officials the problems listed, from most to least serious, were losing their identity, missing somebody (spouse, children and family members), missing social life, worrying about how they will cope when released (for life imprisonment they don't know the release date), feeling that their lives are being wasted and feeling sexually frustrated.

### **Prison Ministry India**

"Be a love Bomb, Let it be exploded, not to kill, But to heal the broken hearts." This small line is the seed of Prison Ministry India. The founders of Prison Ministry India are Bro. Varghese Karippery and Bro. Francis Kodiyan (Philosophy Students in St Thomas apostolic Seminary, Vadavathoor, Kottayam) and they initiated the work on 8th December 1981. They began to think of how they could become a Love Bomb to explode love in to the lives of several broken hearted? They pray for the different groups of dejected and despondent people such as alcoholics, prisoners, sick, drug-addicts, slum dwellers, and others. It is through their inspiration and zeal to work for the marginalized that these two brothers along with others in the seminary started to visit the prisons. Gradually this ministry spreads to different prisons across Kerala and eventually to different parts of the country. Initially began under the name of Jesus Fraternity and later it is called as Prison Ministry India. The National office is situated at Carmelaram in Bangalore. There are about 6000 active volunteers consisting of priests, sisters and laity rendering their services in the prisons.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Sykes, G. (1966), *The society of captives*, New York: Atheneum.

<sup>17</sup> <http://prisonministryindia.org/>

## Vision

To release, renew, rehabilitate prisoners and reform prisons, facilitate social re-integration, ensure congruent function of government systems and structures for the amelioration of victims, offenders, society, government authorities, families of victims and offenders; which shall be attained by having committed volunteers, priests, religious and laity, conducting need based training, creating sensitivity in government authorities, facilitating empowerment, appropriately using philanthropic people, praying, using scientific research tools, follow up programmes, creating social awareness, planning and executing meticulous preventive measures, conducting regular and holistic counselling, providing legal assistance, etc.

## Rehabilitation of prisoners: 3R theory

If conducive atmosphere is provided for any prisoner, he/she can rise up to a normal standard of living. Every prisoner has an ardent desire to lead a better life in society. In the rehabilitation process PMI formulate a theory called the “three R theory” for rehabilitation of prisoners

*Release, renewal and rehabilitation* are the three main factors, which play vital role to equip a prisoner to lead a normal life:

**1. Release,** is the outcome of an ongoing process in which a prisoner gets various positive strokes, which facilitate to develop hope, attitude of forgiveness and love especially towards those whom they hate and to view the positive aspects of the whole universe. In another way release is to overcome/freed from the negative attitudes/thoughts, guilt feelings, criminal intention, revenge attitude, low sense of self, etc.

*Hope in life:* When a person enters the prison, his hope for a bright future/tomorrow and his identity is shattered. One develops the attitude of dejection, social stigma, worthlessness, hopelessness, etc. They feel that the whole society including their kith and kin view and labelled them as a “criminal”. It is not easy to bear such a stigma in life. At this particular juncture, a prisoner needs a person to help him/her to help themselves, to instill hope into their lives.



*Forgiving love:* The pain and the sufferings inflicted by the punishment develop hatred towards the person responsible for his imprisonment. Slowly the revengeful attitude towards the society increases and the persons grow in this attitude/mind is most dangerous. This repeated negative thoughts and vindictive attitude weakness the whole body and mind of a prisoner and lose hope in their lives. There should be a guide, who has won the confidence of the prisoner to help the victim to forgive the offence even in imagination those whom he or she hates.

*Strengthening the will - power:* When a person has lost his belief in self, his/her mental power is very weak. They have to be helped to regain the lost strength and energy. Positive suggestions could be a very effective way of restoring the lost vigor at all levels.

*Self-transformation:* If one is determined to shed off his/her old life style, which has been perverted and criminal by nature, he or she could be motivated for higher goals in life. The best agents, who could cater to such needs of a human being, will be committed voluntary organizations.

2. **Renewal** is the second stage of rehabilitation. It means to put new life and vigor into a person to restore him/her to the original condition. Here a released prisoner is motivated to undergo various kinds of training to face the challenges put forth by the society.

- « The mental resetting
- « Letter writing
- « Visualizing good in others and self
- « Work therapy
- « Prayer
- « Living in the present
- « Confidence in self-image
- « Messages of the nature
- « Family apostolate

3. **Rehabilitation** is the last stage of prisoners upliftment program. Rehabilitation refers to activities designed to change criminals into law abiding citizens, and may include providing educational courses in prison, teaching job skills and offering counselling with professionals. Rehabilitation seeks to assist both offenders, their family and society.

*Search for job facilities:* The society finds difficult to accept the person released from prison and search job is tedious one. To successfully resettle in life PMI helps to search job and assist to develop self-employment opportunities.

*Re-integration into the family:* It is another important area where the preservation and strengthening of prisoners family ties and parent-child relationships helps in re-integration process. In the renewal process, the animators begin to visit the homes of prisoners and prepare the ground for re-establishing the lost family ties. They provide assistance with revenue generating schemes for the family and education for the children.

*Follow up:* Authentic and reciprocal relationship between the center and person should be activated by follow up program, visits and gatherings. This would be a strong motivating and highly sustaining factor in their struggles to lead a normal life in society.

The core intent is to transform each prison into a resource centre and be able to use the collective pool of knowledge. This in turn will facilitate others to take the first step in treating them with respect.

1. Prisoners (under trial and convicted, juvenile and adult, Men, women and transgender)
2. Prisoners family
3. Victims family
4. Prison ecosystem and officials
5. Community

All the 5 modules facilitate in the reformation of the prisoner and the environment surrounding the crime.

### **Activities undertaken by the PMI**

- « Regularly visit the prisons and undertake the various activities as teaching, training, counseling, etc. based on the projects they are handling.
- « Conducting skill based training and behavioural workshops for the prison staff to improve their effectiveness.
- « Providing legal advices to the inmates.
- « Setting up a consortium of lawyers in each city to take up cases of the poor.
- « Conducting medical camps for the prisoners and prison staff on a regular basis. A general complete health checkup and also specialized check-ups as dental, eye, ortho, etc. are organized and provide free spectacles and other aids.
- « Conducting regular cultural events and festival events in prison. This includes: cultural programs, drama, dance, food and other activities.
- « On a regular basis they conduct painting, drawing, dancing, poetry, essay writing and other competitions.

The above said activities are conducted commonly all over India and some programs may differ from prison to prison. The programs are planned and designed based on the need, nature of the offence, offender, type of the crime, reason for the crime, etc. The programmes offered by PMI focus predominantly on areas such as education, counseling, trauma debriefing, life skills programmes, maintenance of family and social relationships, after-care services, staff development programs, helping prisoners' children in their education. Here the writer focused on the services rendered by PMI in Tamil Nadu Prisons especially Palayamkottai and Madurai with special reference to educational and counseling aspects for both prisoners and their children.

### **Activities in the Central Prison, Palayamkottai**

PMI volunteers (Fathers, sisters and Lay persons) in Tirunelveli and Madurai unit visiting the Central Prison, Palayamkottai and Madurai, both for men and women, Borstal school, district jail and sub jails.

Prison Ministry in Tirunelveli and Madurai has around 30 years of experience and they started their services in Palayamkottai prison officially on 10.03.2006.

### **Some important events in the Central Prison, Palayamkottai**

- « 26-10-2006, 29-11-2006: Refresher course for 100 prison police (2 batches).
- « 15-06-2008: Computer course for prisoners – 20 participated and batch continues.
- « In 2008, a prisoner was released on general amnesty and no one in the family is ready to receive him. PMI paid the fine amount and he is in old age home with the support of PMI and they are the guardian for him.
- « 07-03-2103: Refresher course for 80 prison police (2 batches).
- « From 2006 to 2014 PMI volunteers visited prison monthly twice and give counseling to the prisoners. They were giving counseling to around 10 prisoners per day. From 2014 to till date they are coming to prison for weekly once and meet 5 to 6 prisoners per day.
- « Counseling is given to prisoners children when there is need. From this academic year 2017 – 2018 onwards they start supporting their children education by paying school and college fees. They pay fees to 16 students and continue it till they complete their education. They monitor them regularly and allot mentors to them who will take care. Along with PMI Bethal Welfare concentrated more on prisoner as well as victim children education.
- « Next, they are planning to extend their services to discharged prisoners and their re-integration process in the society. As an initiative, they paid fine amount Rs. 8000/ to a prisoner at the time of release. Now they are planning to donate sewing machine to him as basically he is a tailor.
- « In female prison, every year PMI organize programs for women's day on 8, March and Christmas celebrations.
- « Every year they assist around 10 prisoners in their legal process.



Year	8 <sup>th</sup> std	10 <sup>th</sup> std	12 <sup>th</sup> std
2013 – 2014	30	4	6
2014 – 2015	52	26	4
2015 – 2016	44	26	24
2016 – 2017	30	24	10
TOTAL	156	80	44

From 2013 to till date 76 prisoners enrolled their name for degree courses under Tamil Nadu Open University distance education. They are doing undergraduate, postgraduate degrees in History, Tamil, Management, etc. Among 76 prisoners 50 completed degree courses.

- « Fr. Richard SJ, Loyola counseling centre regularly following adolescent prisoners (around 60) kept in Central Prison, Madurai.
- « Distribute 160 spectacles to life convicts.
- « Under trail women are given new sarees (190) on New year day.
- « Attended functions in convicts' families when he could not be present. Like death, birth day, wedding day etc.
- « Women were given training to stitch gift bags and they stitched 1000 bags.

### Challenges in Rehabilitation

- « As these programs are voluntary, a large number of offenders do not participate.
- « Lack of awareness/understanding about the importance of education.
- « Develop an attitude that education is meant for youngsters and what can I do by studying in this age and have mental make-up that it is difficult to remember.
- « Most of them are working in prison industries and engaged in other works through which they earn. He spends that money for his survival as well as sent it to the family. So, he and his family are

benefitted which helps to reduce the guilt feeling of his behavior. It also strengthens the family ties which increases the family support. It gives confidence and increases inner strength. So, work is more attractive than education in prison.

- « Inmates belonging to the age group of above 21 years go through the syllabus and system meant for regular schoolings. So, it doesn't create much interest and in their mind, it arises a question of what is the purpose of studying formal school education.
- « Regarding counseling rapport building with the inmates is difficult as PMI volunteers visited weekly once or twice. Some had a feeling they are religious people, so they may preach religious/spiritual values. Follow up counseling is difficult for remand prisoners as they will go to court and also went on bail.
- « PMI tries to link the family with the inmates when nobody visited him. Imprisonment disrupts relationships between spouses, as well as between parents and children. When an income generating member of the family is imprisoned the rest of the family must adjust to this loss of income. This increases the burden of the family members. Due to social stigma and shame the family members avoid him which creates tension. When they contact the family, they refuse to interact with him. So first they have to counsel the family members, which is rather tedious. It is a long process and at times, it results in failure. At times the address may not be proper. If family is shifted to some other place, it is in very rural area and difficult to find. These are some obstacles faced during family communication.
- « Lack of commitment from the officials and management. It is the responsibility of prison officials to motivate the inmates as they come in contact with them on daily basis and have in depth understanding with them.

### **Impact in Rehabilitation**

Rehabilitation programs help to reduce re-offending and build confidence in their life. Some impression from the inmates:

- « First I am not interested in studies and I refuse to go, but slowly I begin to see myself as a student capable of something better than others. Sometimes I feel pride also.
- « Another inmate of 25 years old nobody to guide him, sharing his experiences as without having enough basic education I didn't know certain thing that lead to wrong track and even the difference between right and wrong. Now I feel confident and continue my reading after the release also.
- « One lifer noted that now I write and read letter by myself. What I think I bring it in the context emotionally and enjoy reading the letter repeatedly which is written by me. When I went on parole nowadays grandparents discussed their school events with books and notebooks. Somehow, I feel calm and satisfied.
- « After attending life skills programs now I've found how the simple principles of life helped me find a new meaning. I love life, people and mainly myself! It put new meaning in me that I never thought would ever happen in me.
- « Another stated, "As a result of the program my attitude toward life has changed and the relationship I have with all people is a lot better. This session has given me back faith in myself. Thanks a lot".
- « These types of programs have helped me to redefine my own reality and make concerted efforts towards my own change and that of fellow inmates. They took time and effort to instill values and ethics into the lives of lost souls.
- « A lifer who killed his wife due to suspicion feels ashamed and has suicidal ideation. Because of his behavior no one in the family is interested to visit him and they develop hatred towards him. Lot of steps are taken by prison staffs, PMI volunteers and others, but family is very firm in their decision of not to meet and show the children to him. Through regular counseling he tries to accept the situation and told it is a challenge to face. He told that still I am living a life of confusion, but there are many opportunities open to me.

- « PMI help the prisoner's children in getting admissions to school, college, paying fees to some of them, admitting freely in hostels, periodically following and counseling them. The volunteers sow seeds in their minds as, 'now we are helping you, in future you have to help at least 10 children like you'. Their school grades are improved and they feel confident and clear in their goals. Most of them are interested in law because they had a thought that if become a lawyer they will the help parents in legal process. As well as we can help others like our parents.

### **Challenges faced by PMI**

1. Financial instability: Begging is life style and get fund from the volunteers.
2. Lack of full timers.
3. No risk taking when to journey along the family.
4. Lack of professional counselors.
5. Need life skills training and trainers to train the inmates.
6. Yet to find potential donors.
7. Needed more conviction and commitment.
8. Needed public awareness that every prisoner need to have respect, dignity and care.
9. Stringent rules and regulations of the prison department.
10. Suspicious of all activities. Restrictions are aplenty.

### **Conclusion**

Against lot of difficulties and challenges, PMI and other NGOs have been providing various kinds of services like providing education, counseling, life skills and vocational training and sponsorship for the children of prisoners for their education, providing educational aids in prison and outside, and organizing competitions and cultural programs. Thus, offenders are afforded the opportunity to engage in productive work, participate in programs and other activities that will enhance self-worth, gain greater self-awareness, enrich the capacity to manage their emotions, empathize with the feelings of others, community



integration, and economic status. This very step has restored a sense of dignity / awareness of self-esteem in the prisoner, which is a major input for result oriented rehabilitation after release. The gainful work done by the prison inmates not only provides a corrective approach to the psyche of the offender but also goes a long way in developing in them a responsive and respectful attitude towards the society. The prisoners not only develop self-confidence and self-esteem out of the valuable labour put in by them but these activities also lead them towards earning an honorable livelihood after release from the prison.

# Anjuman-E-Himayath-E-Islam Its Legacy of Service to Society

A. Faizur Rahman

The article describes the historic legacy of and the service rendered by the well-known 125-year old Anjuman-E-Himayath-E-Islam, mosque and institution, motivated and guided by the Quranic moral injunctions of educating, caring and supporting orphans and destitute children. Mr. Faizur Rahman is the Founder Secretary General for the Chennai-based Islamic Forum for the Promotion of Moderate Thought. He is an Independent Researcher and Journalist, contributed many articles in daily newspapers, and a consultant in Islamic jurisprudence. <email.faiz@gmail.com>

## Introduction

Humanitarianism is one the fundamental doctrines of Islam. The importance of public-spiritedness in Islam can be gauged from the fact that despite not being a wealthy man Prophet Muhammad was recognized as the most benevolent of his times, a character he developed by allowing himself to be guided by the Book he brought, which (in chapters 90 and 107) equates *najd* (perspicuous path) and *deen* (Islamic way of life) with liberating people from bondage, feeding the needy, indigent and the orphans, standing for peace, and mutually enjoining unwavering perseverance and compassion. Indeed, chapter 107 declares that failure to do the above would amount to falsifying and invalidating the *deen* of Islam! This Quranic proclamation coupled with the emphasis (in verses 20:114 and 22:46) on acquisition of knowledge and wisdom announces the real agenda of Islam - peace through service to humanity.

Islamic humanitarianism manifested itself mainly in its teachings of gender-equality, women's rights and universal brotherhood irrespective of a person's caste, colour or birth. The first person to be appointed

the prayer caller (muezzin) was an emancipated black slave named Bilal Ibn Rabah.

Women were allowed to pray in the mosques and were given property rights. By contrast, under the doctrine of Coverture, which was enshrined in the common law of England and the United States throughout most of the 19th century, a woman's legal rights were subsumed by those of her husband upon marriage. Till this law was abolished married woman were not entitled to enter into contracts, own property, educate themselves or seek employment. In the rare event of a woman being allowed to work she had no right over her salary which taken away by her husband and spent as per his whims.

An in-depth study of the Quranic thought would reveal that Islam is not the name of a personal god-based ritualistic religion. It is actually a system of moral guidelines which proposes to regulate society on the universal principles (termed *maroof* by the Quran) of justice, fairness and equity through the institutions of prayers (*salaat* or *namaz*), fasting (*saum*), *Hajj* and *zakat* (compulsory tax).

During *salaat* the message of the Quran is read out five times a day to people standing shoulder to shoulder in the mosque irrespective of their social or financial status. This negates the doctrine of untouchability and inculcates a sense of communal equality. *Saum*, the thirty-day Ramazan fasting, focuses attention on hunger, and *zakat* underscores the importance of equitable distribution of wealth, and through it the eradication of poverty. *Hajj* is more of an annual international conference to discuss global issues for the benefit of mankind as implied by the Quran (22: 27-28) than just a pilgrimage to perform certain rites. It is also the world's biggest display of unity in diversity where men and women of different nationalities congregate for a common cause.

Right from the time Islam established itself in Arabia in the seventh century, Muslims have conscientiously tried to emulate Prophet Muhammad in upholding Quranic altruism in the spirit of the aforementioned egalitarian principle. And this effort became one of the primary reasons for the spread of Islam across the globe, not

imperialistic violence as widely propagandized. Over the centuries, even in India, Muslim individuals and organizations dedicated themselves to the service of humanity.

One such philanthropic movement was started in the heart of Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, under the name Anjuman-e-Himayath-e-Islam. It is located on Vijaya Raghava Road, T. Nagar. The following is a brief history of this great institution which uses the collective financial power of the Muslim community for the uplift of the underprivileged sections of society, especially the orphaned children.

### Genesis

Anjuman-e-Himayath-e-Islam (AHI) was founded 125 years ago on the auspicious day of 27th Ramzan 1307 A.H. (1890 A.D.) by His Excellency Nawab Sir Mohammed Munawar Khan Bahadur, KCIE (Knight Commander of Indian Empire), IV Prince of Arcot along with like-minded people of Madras (Chennai).

The main objectives were the vital and noble acts in community services namely caring for orphans and educating the under-privileged sections of the society. The AHI was registered under the Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Act of 1860, on the 5<sup>th</sup> October 1894, and subsequently under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act in the year 1978.

The mission of this charitable institution is to support the life of orphans and destitute children with spiritual and material aids so as to transform them into respectable and responsible citizens of India. The AHI considers its noble mission to be based on Prophet Muhammad's declaration that "the best of homes is the one in which the orphan is most cared for" and that the benefactor of orphans will have a place of honour in Heaven close to the Prophet himself. The affluent Muslims of Southern India had always evinced keen interest in community development, and more particularly showed great concern for the welfare of the widows, destitute and orphans. Since its inception till date, the AHI has provided philanthropists an ideal platform, through which sustained care and support can be given to the needy and this has helped them to lead an honourable life, and also made many of



them to become achievers in different walks of life. In addition to the above social activity, the AHI is also involved in maintaining Islamic culture and promoting peace and harmony in our plural society.

### **Inception of Homes for Boys and Girls**

The pioneering galaxy of Muslim philanthropists of the early 20th century who steered the activities of AHI included Khan Bahadur Mohammed Mahmood, Khan Bahadur Moulvi Nizamddin, Khan Bahadur Abdul Aziz Badsha, Shifaul Mulk Hajee Hakim Syed Maqhdoom Ashraff, Dr. Syed Niamatullah, Moulvi Nazeer Hussain and Moulana Moulvi Alhaj Syed Abdul Wahab Bukhari.

Shaken by the widely prevalent neglect and lack of adequate care of the orphan and destitute children by their relatives and guardians, the AHI under the guidance of Shamsul Ulama Moulvi Haji Ghulam Rasool realized this fact and the need for establishing a home to protect the interest of the destitute boys and consequently an orphanage was established in the premises of the historic Wallajah Mosque, Triplicane, Madras.

Initially AHI provided food and accommodation to Muslim orphans and destitute boys. During this period, arrangements were made for the education of the boys teaching them carpentry and tailoring in the Industrial School run by the Anjuman-e-Mufid-e-Ahl-e-Islam, Mount Road, Madras. Realizing the need for an orphanage for girls, AHI opened a separate home for orphan girls in a rented building and services and facilities similar to that for boys were extended to girls also.

Through sincere and dedicated services rendered by office bearers and staff of AHI, this institution gained popularity and orphan boys were admitted in larger numbers from all the Districts of the State. To meet the growing cost of maintenance and education and to provide suitable accommodation for the increasing number of boys, special donations were collected and a property was purchased at 53, Wallajah Road, Chennai, and the orphanage was shifted to that place. A few small properties were also purchased and a few others were received as gifts to ensure a regular income to supplement private contributions.

## **Inclusion of formal education**

To provide formal education to the inmates, a regular elementary school conforming to Government regulations was then opened by the AHI in the premises of the orphanage, and an annual grant in-aid for the school and an annual boarding grant for the orphanage were obtained from the Government. An annual contribution was also secured from the Corporation of Madras. In the course of time, the school became a higher elementary school and the boys passing out of it pursued their education either in high schools or in technical schools and were fully supported by AHI for their educational requirements. In addition to literary and technical education, the residents also received religious and moral instructions under teachers specially engaged for this purpose. For lack of space we leave out the expansion of amenities and activities of the Institution.

## **Towards developing a model community**

During the last two decades, the vision and mission of the AHI were redefined and goals and objectives were set more towards Human Resource Development through offering latest formal and spiritual education to the under-privileged sections of the society. Tremendous progress has been made by successive Presidents, Secretaries and Treasures during the last two decades in establishing appropriate infrastructure to impart quality education and extra-curricular activities to the residents of AHI.

Subsequently, the functioning of AHI was further improved with a commitment to producing *khair-e-ummah* (best of humankind) from the disadvantaged children entrusted in its care. Accordingly a holistic approach was adopted wherein the residents are now given formal education, Islamic education, sports training, extra-curricular activities and soft skills. This approach has made many residents to excel in multifarious fields. Through these developments the homes have been transformed into Human Resource Development Centers.

In 1993, AHI established an NCVT-approved Himayath Industrial Training Centre (HITC) to impart vocational and employable skills in Electrical, Plumbing and Refrigeration to AHI boys and other students.

The Centre has trained hundreds of boys and made them employable both in India and overseas.

### **Centenary celebration**

In 1995 the AHI celebrated its centenary and the chairman of the celebration committee Dr. S.K. Khadri Sahib despite stiff opposition, led the launching of a massive commemorative building. The building came into existence with liberal contributions from several donors and was inaugurated in the year 2000 by Her Excellency M. Fathima Beevi, the Governor of Tamil Nadu. The centenary building has become another land mark of the AHI, and also an income-generating source as it is being rented to major commercial establishments, the present tenant being *Cloud Nine Hospitals*.

In the mid 1990s, the seeds of an-English-medium Matriculation Higher Secondary School were sown, and with the generosity of Governing Body member Mr. K.U. Abdullah, the construction of the school building was started, and upon completion of the ground and first-floor, the school started functioning from 1997. On 4th March 2000, Her Excellency M. Fatima Beevi, Governor of Tamil Nadu, declared open the new building with the addition of the Second floor, which was named as “Begum Asiya Mammoo Memorial Building” in memory of Mr. K. U. Abdulla’s grandmother.

The portals of the school are also open to other children in the neighborhood irrespective of their community background. With well-equipped classrooms and laboratories, the school provides quality formal education as well as moral and religious education to the students. Students are also encouraged to participate in physical education and sports. This has enabled the students to excel both in the field of Education and Sports and they secure 100% results in public exams and also win many inter school sports and other competitions at national and international level. AHI’s boys and girls are encouraged to take part in extracurricular activities such as martial arts, NCC, road safety patrol, etc., and they have participated in many inter-school tournaments in Hockey, Football, Baseball, Cricket and Rugby. Students here have also participated in International tournaments held in China and Pakistan in baseball and rugby.

The construction of a separate building was started in the late 1990s to house the Academy for Women, which was partly financed by the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), Saudi Arabia, and this was inaugurated in the year 2000 by Her Excellency M. Fathima Beevi, the Governor of Tamil Nadu. The Academy recognizes and leverages a women's crucial role as the 'Teacher' and a 'Catalyst' of a family (whose influence extends to at least three generations) by offering a plethora of Islamic courses and skill-based vocational training geared at enlightening, educating and equipping women to succeed in this life and the hereafter.

It offers innovative programmes for women from all cross-sections of society, be they home-makers, students, employed or job-seekers. It has also pioneered into Children's Islamic education through the Al-Hikmah Islamic week-end School and various Summer camps which have become very popular especially amongst the convent going children.

### **Elaboration of Religious Activities**

As the number of AHI residents and participants offering prayers in the Mosque increased considerably, there was space constraint in the mosque to accommodate them, and this necessitated further extension of the mosque area. On 10th March 2001 mosque extension work was initiated and construction work was completed by extending the mosque area from 9,000 to 15,000 square feet and this was inaugurated on 29th March 2002.

### **Infrastructure Development**

In the absence of medical facilities within the Campus, the children of AHI's Homes were being sent outside the campus for treatment. To provide in-house medical facility to the residents of AHI and to accommodate sick children and also to treat out-patients, the Health Centre was constructed in the AHI campus and inaugurated on 4th March 2003 by Dr. C. Pratap Reddy, Chairman, Apollo Group of Hospitals, in the presence of Justice Sirpurkar, the then Chief Justice of Madras High Court. While the ground floor of the Health Centre was constructed with liberal donations from the Ahmed Brothers of



M/s Amsons in memory of their Mother “Mrs. Sofia Ahmed”, the left-wing of the First floor was constructed with generous donations from the “Abdul Rahman Sait Trust”.

Yet another feather in the cap of the AHI, and an invaluable addition to its exhaustive list of facilities, is the launching in 2004 of the Al-Hira Model School. An English-medium Primary School, Al-Hira had a modest beginning with about 40 Children, who were primarily the residents of boys and girls homes.

Soon, the school opened its doors to day-scholars, and in a very short period of time established itself as one of the most sought after schools offering affordable quality education. It has on its rolls today 750 students and 50 teachers from KG to Std X, Al-Hira Model School was affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in the year 2013, and has been securing 100% results in the X Board examinations from the very first batch onwards. In 2004, a part of the boys home was renovated and the boys section of the Matriculation School was shifted to this new building. In 2005, the Residential Block to house AHI Staff within the campus for better supervision of the inmates was constructed.

A new building adjacent to Matriculation Higher Secondary School was constructed to house the primary section in the ground floor. The first and second floor of this building was designed as four modern Science and Maths laboratories, well equipped for the higher secondary classes. This was inaugurated by Shri Surjit Singh Barnala, the then Governor of Tamil Nadu, in the year 2008.

In 2009, the multi-purpose hall in the administrative building was totally renovated and converted into a modern conference hall with a seating capacity of 45, and donated by Mr. T. Rafeeq Ahmed, President of AHI. The conference hall was named in memory of AHI’s past President as “Alhaj T. Abdul Wahid Sahib Conference Hall”.

The need to provide a safe and comfortable girls’ hostel for the ex-residents of the AHI and outsiders too, who pursued higher studies in colleges, was also taken care of by constructing a new hostel block in the year 2009. In 2012, the Vocational Training Centre for Girls was

constructed. With well-equipped infrastructure, girls are trained in computer courses in the first floor and in leather shoe upper manufacturing in the ground floor. The centre was donated to AHI by Dr. Junaid Rasheed and Mrs. Sadiya Junaid. On 9th April 2012, the building was declared open and was named as Tahera Rasheed Sahiba Vocational Training Centre for Girls in memory of Dr. Junaid Rashid's mother Mrs. Tahera Rasheed Sahiba.

Annually AHI admits about 100 to 120 deserving orphan destitute and poor Muslim children aged between 3 and 6 years following a well-established procedure of scrutinizing the applications, intensive interaction and verification by the AHI Committee for Admission to Homes to ascertain the genuineness of the applicant. The members of this committee collect the applications from the office and go to the addresses given in the applications, and personally verify the conditions of the applicants and their families, and then send their verification reports to the AHI office with their recommendations which help in selecting the most genuine of cases. The selected residents are then first inculcated with a very strong academic and moral foundation through a specially designed curriculum under Primary Education Program (PEP).

Another recent introduction to the multiple facets of AHI is the induction of Darul Ansar Centre for Applied Learning (CAL). CAL believes that every child is unique and possesses latent talents. The purpose of CAL is to enable children with learning disabilities and behavioral issues, to improve their academic as well as overall performance. CAL is functioning in a modern and spacious two storied building which has recently come up, thanks to the generosity of our donors Dr. A. Mohamed Salahuddin Sahib and Mr. Mahmood Poppat Jamal who have contributed Rs. 60 lakhs and Rs. 1 Crore, respectively. Darul Ansar CAL, housed in the ground floor, is named in memory of Dr. A. M. Salahuddin Sahib's father Janab Mohammed Ansar Basha Sahib. The first floor is established as Skill Development Center for Women and named after Mrs. Shakeroonissa Noordeen Poppat Jamal Sahiba. This center imparts requisite training to the girls in professional courses for giving them better opportunities for employment.

All this wonderful infrastructure that has been so assiduously built up over the years at the Anjuman Campus is the result of the untiring efforts of our dedicated members Mr. Mustafa and Mr K.M. Asadullah Badsha initially, and Mr. Mohammed Haris over the last couple of decades, all outstanding architects of repute who volunteered their expertise and services so generously for the Anjuman.

### **Enhancing skills**

The U.S. State Department's Office of English Language Programs has been conducting a two-year "Access" English Micro scholarship Program" for underprivileged students (14-18 year olds) around the world. Access is a two-year interactive English teaching program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C. The aim of the two-year program is to provide the young students with the language skills they need to enter university and to begin careers in the international market place.

The Access Program was launched in India in 2004 and Anjuman-e-Himayath-e-Islam Matriculation Higher Secondary School was the only school in South India selected for the launch of the "Access" program. Since 2004 upto 2012, batches of students numbering 60 to 120 who completed their Access courses have successfully entered into degree / professional colleges. Eleven of them have successfully attended scholarship programs in the United States from 2007 - 2012.

### **Spiritual enlightenment**

The Islamic Information and Research Centre (IIRC) established by AHI during 2001 has a well-equipped library with a wide variety of books and journals on varied subjects, ranging from InfoTech to Islamic Information. IIRC aims at providing authentic, unbiased information on Islam to the Muslim Community and to promote deeper understanding of the religion. A qualified resident Khateeb (preacher) delivers the Jumah Khutba (Friday Sermon) in Urdu. The Anjuman's Friday congregation is very popular and attracts many men and women from all over the city. IIRC also invites many learned Muslim scholars from all over the country to address our students and public.

In order to facilitate Salah for women in the Anjuman and women from the neighborhood, a separate air-conditioned Masjid for ladies with separate entry and exit, and ablution facilities was built adjacent to the men's Masjid. Today the Anjuman Ladies Masjid attracts women from all over the city especially on Friday and Eid prayers.

### **Joyous Occasions**

AHI organizes many events to promote spirit of universal brotherhood. Besides celebrating the two Eid Festivals, it conducts a very grand annual feature, Jashn-e-Eid with a magnificent carnival with plenty of games and food stalls open to all school children, which enables AHI's children to join with other children and enjoy the festivities. The participants generally are residents, members of management, teachers, non-teaching staff, well-wishers, philanthropists, general body members and their families. AHI celebrates Independence and Republic Day in a very grand manner and students exhibit their extra-ordinary capabilities in oration, march-past, karate, silambam and other drills.

### **Glorifying Lives**

Currently AHI has on its rolls more than 2000 boys and girls as residents and beneficiaries of its educational, vocational training, lodging and social support activities. At present, there are around 800 boys and girls in the AHI homes. The Matriculation school has on its rolls 900 students and secured 100% passes in the Board Examinations. Annually about 300 students are enrolled in the Vocational courses being offered and most of them have been placed in various establishments in India and overseas. As of today, the strength of students of Al-Hira Model School is 750 from Junior KG to X Standard. There is an active Alumni Association which is also involved in supporting the activities of AHI.

There are innumerable children who are orphans and face social, educational and economic handicaps. The AHI reaches out to this section of society. It provides a home for them along with education and imparts the moral values of humanity, which reflect the spirit of Islam. Thousands of boys and girls have passed through its portals for the past 125 years and have been rehabilitated and transformed as respectable and responsible members of the society.



# **L'Arche, Disability and Social Engagement**

**Anne Escrader**

The article attempts to answer the governing question, "In what ways does L'Arche engage society?" The answer unfolds in three steps: 1) A brief account of Jean Vanier and L'Arche has been provided. 2) Vanier's concept of person and the pedagogy of L'Arche have been described. 3) Five themes of pedagogical importance have been discussed to show the unique ways in which social engagement takes place. Dr. Ms. Anne Escrader graduate with a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology and Special Education from The University of Western Ontario, Canada worked extensively with the L'Arche community in Canada, and presently teaches online courses for the Intellectual Disability Studies program at St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada. <anneescrader@gmail.com>

## **Introduction**

Social engagement can be described as the degree to which one participates in society or community. According to Zunzunegui et al. (2004) social engagement is defined as community involvement such as belonging to neighbourhood groups, religious groups or non-governmental organizations. Social engagement implies the act of doing 'good', freely, with no compulsion. In some cases it may involve working as a volunteer, or for very little pay. Through social engagement, persons give and receive from one another, adding value, and creating better communities and societies. Social engagement meaningfully entered into, can yield a sense of happiness, contentment and a general sense of well-being.

Here I focus on the work of Jean Vanier and L'Arche and the community's engagement with society. Jean Vanier, Ph.D. is a philosopher, writer, religious and moral leader and the founder of two

major international community-based organizations, L'Arche and Faith and Light, that were created for people with intellectual disabilities. To date, L'Arche has 135 communities in 33 countries, and Faith and Light has 1,612 communities in 81 countries. These are vibrant communities of human transformation through which Vanier and those he inspires advocate for the poor and the weak in our society.

While the progressive disability movement speaks mainly about tolerance, rights and normalization, Vanier offers a distinct way of thinking about persons with developmental disabilities and living in community with them. He invites us to recognize the profound gifts and lessons that people who have been rejected by society can offer when they are properly supported and included.

This article has its origin in the period of time I spent at L'Arche as an assistant, and the research work I conducted as a graduate student studying the pedagogy of L'Arche. When I hear, and contemplate the term "social engagement" my thoughts surprisingly rest with L'Arche. No other learning environment has challenged me to be more thoughtful, considerate and inclusive: in short, more human. From my personal experience, and through the experiences of many others who have lived at L'Arche, it is clear that the community continues to be a vibrant site for social engagement and transformation.

Using hermeneutic phenomenology, I conducted an in-depth inquiry into the life world of L'Arche, and explored the socio cultural context and the narratives of community members in two communities, in Canada and France. My research draws attention to L'Arche as a learning community in which knowledge is actively co-constructed between and among community members. Therefore this article focuses on the pedagogy of L'Arche, through which we can grasp the unique ways in which L'Arche engages with society to bring about personal and social transformation. The socio cultural aspect of L'Arche must necessarily be viewed against its history, foundation and pedagogical value.

### **A brief note on Jean Vanier and L'Arche**

L'Arche was founded in France, in 1964 by Jean Vanier, son of the first Canadian born Governor General of Canada, Georges P. Vanier,

and his wife, Pauline Vanier. At the age of 13, Vanier joined the Royal Navy, where he served for nine years. Following this he spent more than a decade studying and teaching philosophy and theology and exploring his deep Roman Catholic faith. Vanier was educated in England, Canada and France (Downey, 1990).

In 1962, he successfully completed his doctoral dissertation in philosophy at l'Institut Catholique de Paris. Upon completion of his dissertation, *Le Bonheur: principe et Fin de la Morale Aristotelicienne*, (*Happiness: Beginning and End of Aristotelian Ethic*) Vanier began teaching philosophy at Saint Michael's College in Toronto (Downey, 1989). Restless, he soon quit the university and moved to France, where he joined his spiritual mentor, Father Thomas Philippe the chaplain at Val Fleuri, an institute for 30 men with developmental disabilities in Trosly-Breuil, a small village outside Paris. There, through his friendship with the Dominican priest, he became aware of the plight of thousands of people with developmental disabilities who were institutionalized. He was profoundly touched by their loneliness and cry for friendship. He felt that God was calling him to do something about it (Spink, 1990; Downey, 1989).

In the small village of Trosly-Breuil, Vanier bought a house and welcomed three men, Raphael Simi, Philippe Seux and Dany, to leave the institutions where they were living and share their lives with him in a real home. Thus, L'Arche was born on Aug. 4, 1964. L'Arche is the French word for "The Ark", and is named after the story of Noah's Ark in the bible (Vanier, 1995). At a later point, Dany had to return to the institution, while Raphael and Philippe stayed on with Vanier to become the founding members of L'Arche. Even at this early stage it was clear that L'Arche could not support all who walked through its doors. Clearly, the environment with its flexible structure was suitable only for some, and since then, many who enter the community, do it only after a period of careful discernment.

Although it was a new and challenging act, welcoming these people was for Vanier an irreversible act. He knew he had embarked upon a journey from which he would not turn back because of his commitment to the people he had welcomed and what he was discovering with

them. Since then Vanier has dedicated his life to friendship with those who are poor and rejected, and announcing the value and contribution that they make to society. Vanier (1998) writes: "Living in l'Arche, I have discovered a lot about loneliness, belonging and the inner pain that springs from a sense of rejection. Community life with men and women who have intellectual disabilities has taught me a great deal about what it means to be human. To some, it may sound strange for me to say that it is the weak, and those who have been excluded from society, who have been my teachers. I hope that I can reveal a bit of what I have learned-and am still learning-about being human and about helping others to discover our common humanity." (page 6).

Slowly, the governing principles of L'Arche took form. A threefold mission developed: 1) to recognize the unique value of each person, 2) to live in friendship and fidelity, and 3) to be a sign of hope in the world. The unique feature of L'Arche is for all involved to live as family and friends, not as clients and staff. Persons with developmental disabilities are called "core members" as they form the core of the community. Those who support them are called "assistants."

Although started as a place of refuge, L'Arche has grown into an International community receiving considerable respect and recognition as a leader in the field of human services because of the progressive views it promotes regarding the re-conceptualization of disability (Clarke, 2006; Cushing, 2003; Cushing and Lewis, 2002; Heshusius, 2004; O'Brien, 2005; Porter, 2006; Pottie and Sumarah, 2004; Sumarah, 1987, 1988). In its fundamental ethos, L'Arche recognizes the human need to belong in community, to make a contribution to society, and to live within an environment that fosters human reciprocity, irrespective of whether one has developmental disabilities or not.

Many people come to L'Arche for the human values it stands for. On the one hand, L'Arche is a faith-based community, with ecumenical and inter-religious dimensions. On the other, it speaks to those who hold agnostic or atheistic beliefs. Arguably, one of the most important aspects of L'Arche is that it fosters an education of the heart. L'Arche has often been referred to as a School of the Heart (Spink, 2006, 1990; Escrader, 2001, 2007) or a School of Life. L'Arche offers deep insight, experience and meaning to those who like Vanier are seekers of truth,



who have embarked on a journey of discovering and understanding our common humanity. Vanier's concept of person is central to the foundation and growth of L'Arche.

### **Vanier's concept of person and the pedagogy of L'Arche**

A deeper understanding of Vanier's concept of person and the pedagogy of L'Arche has important implications for how we know and relate to people who have developmental disabilities. Knowing more about L'Arche implies that we might, as Vanier did, learn how to view a person: not according to his or her capacity for reason alone, but rather according to his or her capacity for relationship (Vanier, 2001). It is precisely by recognizing a person's capacity for relationship regardless of whether she or he has disabilities, and living from this standpoint, that we may experience a transformative pedagogy of the heart, personally and collectively.

Vanier (1998) explains that the metaphorical heart, the basis of all relationship, is what is deepest in each one of us, existing prior to and beyond reason and/or efficiency; the heart exists before we think. Vanier stresses that a human being is more than the power of the capacity to think and to perform. It is from the heart, this hidden ground of love, that we meet others, suffer and rejoice with them. It is the place where we can be in communion with others, the place where we can identify and be in solidarity with others. It was through his experience with persons who had developmental disabilities that Vanier was able to bring more clarity to his vision of person and of the heart. Downey (1990) writes: "Not exhibiting the ability for greatness in Aristotelian terms, they [persons with disabilities] were nonetheless capable of living very simple and joyful lives with deep compassion, joy, and the ability to forgive, reconcile, and celebrate. With very little intellectual ability, or ability to produce things by work of their hands, the men -- and later women of L'Arche - taught Vanier that there is something deeper, richer, more profound and fundamental to the human person than the intellect. By their very lives, these men and women were living examples that it is indeed possible to live a human and happy life without riches or the intellect. They taught Vanier that there are other values than those of the mind, and those of efficiency and productivity." (p.194)

Vanier writes about discovering “the way of the heart” at L’Arche. For Vanier, the way of the heart includes both teaching and learning; it is a communication which involves the back and forth movement of healing and being healed, of understanding and being understood, where the one who is healed and the one who is healing constantly change places. In learning and living from the heart, there is a qualitative shift in understanding of self and other that occurs, moving from idealism to reality (Vanier, 1998), from exclusion to inclusion, from isolation to community, from individuality to mutuality.

Having lived for over fifty years at L’Arche, Vanier (2001) proposes a moral philosophy for our time that is accessible to everyone because it starts at that point of commonality, that point which is germane to all meaning: he suggests that what we have in common is that we are all persons constituted by heart. His moral philosophy starts with three affirmations: 1) every human being, regardless of his or her limitations, culture, or religion, is important and valuable and should be respected; 2) the worst ill is disdain of another person, which can lead to oppression and the suppression of human life; and 3) in order to progress towards the fullness of life that is inscribed in his or her being, every person at some time or other, needs others. (Vanier 2001)

Through Vanier’s moral philosophy, concept of person, and pedagogy of the heart, L’Arche can be seen as a sign of hope, making the full participation of people who have disabilities not only possible but beneficial for all. Many who have come to L’Arche have benefited by it. Many stories of personal transformation have joined the bigger story of L’Arche. Through the following narrative, we get a tacit understanding of how L’Arche continues to influence and transform persons till today.

### **Murray’s story**

“L’Arche has been the love letter from God to me,” says Fr. Murray, “to heal me and transform me.” Murray is a long-time friend and member of L’Arche. As an ordained priest, he serves as the community chaplain. His narrative emerges from nearly forty years of friendship with the community.

Murray tells the story of how he first came to L'Arche. He was ordained to the priesthood on May 14, 1977, during which experienced as a phase of uncertainty and emotional turmoil in his life. He speaks of "waffling" along, constantly questioning his calling, and praying for spiritual certitude. Murray was ill for a time, and he was treated for depression and ulcers spanning a period of about four or five months. Following that, he took up employment as a security guard for thirteen months, and then acquired a position with a social service organization in 1979. He has since then been a social worker, continuing in this vocation for 37 years. Murray observes, "If ...the truth be known, I had a breakdown. I went to a treatment centre and had about four and a half months of treatment. I had ulcers too – and was in incredible physical pain. I remember praying to God that He'd give me a sign. And to go to the end of the story, L'Arche has been the love letter from God to me, to heal me and transform me. That would be the essence of what I'm saying."

Murray heard about L'Arche from several sources and was curious about the community. He remembers listening to Jean Vanier in 1965, when Vanier visited his high school. Murray does not remember much of what Vanier said, but one thing stood out: "Jean Vanier came and spoke at my high school, and the only thing I remember from that talk was that it didn't matter whether you had holes in your socks or what kind of clothes you wore. But I think it was his talk about the poor that touched my heart."

Through L'Arche, Murray learned that just as it was acceptable to have holes in one's socks; it was also acceptable not to have a perfectly integrated life. This was freeing. Murray's supervisor at work encouraged him to visit L'Arche. Interestingly enough, Murray's spiritual director, a psychiatrist and priest who had heard about L'Arche, also encouraged him to do the same thing. Murray remembers being invited by the community director to participate in two events; these invitations were foundational to his relationship with L'Arche. He says: "...Marjory called me and said that she wanted some support to go to the Faith and Light program in Lourdes, in 1981. She said that there was a benefactor who would pay my way. Then she invited me to

come to L'Arche and celebrate the Eucharist. I can remember the first time I celebrated Eucharist. It was probably pivotal, a spiritual, life-shaping event for me. I was still dealing with all these questions, should I stay, should I leave, you know. I rested there and sat on the mat in front of the altar and all of a sudden I had this incredible feeling that I was at home. I was at home for the first time in my life, you know! I started to laugh. I remember that [day] like it was yesterday. I reflected about how it didn't matter whether I was still together or not, or how much I had integrated my life. It didn't matter how screwed up I was. That didn't matter to the core people – there was this sense of unconditional positive regard. So to put it in a nutshell, is to say that for a lot of my life, I missed the truth about life, love, and faith by about eleven inches, which is about the distance between my head and my heart. L'Arche introduced me to the language of the heart. And gave me a kind of language to understand myself, and to accept myself and love myself in my brokenness, and to even smile and laugh at my own handicaps. So that was kind of the beginning.”

One of the high points in Murray's life was when he went on that pilgrimage with the community to Lourdes, during Easter 1981. He remembers that he was at table when a Canadian Bishop asked to speak with him. Murray was requested to preach the homily in English on Easter Sunday, after the Bishop spoke, because there was no other English-speaking priest. The Canadian bishop wanted Murray to speak about the Holy Father's message to the pilgrims of Lourdes. The English translation was going to come out only at midnight. To Murray, a lot of pieces were coming together in his life at one time. He said: “And so I did [preach] and the miracle of all of that was - here I was a priest - on a leave of absence; my home parish is Our Lady of Lourdes; I'm a Resurrectionist; It was Easter Sunday, and I was asked to preach on the Resurrection - with L'Arche! Then Jean Vanier came to the Sacristy before Mass – he came over and gave me a big hug, and [he] didn't know me from a can of beans, you know.”

Murray experienced the profound spiritual uplift of the Triduum, the traditional Easter celebration, and entered into “those very special moments of the faith” with the core people. Murray recognizes in



himself the compulsion to “accomplish,” and allow what he does to give him an identity. But he has also learned that there is value in sitting down at the dining table, just “being” with people. This is part of the transformation of the heart for Murray: “Throughout the Triduum, there was the entering into those very special moments of our faith with our core people - like going out and washing the feet of the core people. Many times there was not only an intellectual handicap, but there was a physical handicap and you’re washing twisted feet...and to see the witness of that. There were many bishops that were there, and the priests that were there, and of course, Easter Sunday, the Fiesta! To see people celebrating – it doesn’t matter who we are, how broken we are, we can celebrate, you see, not only assistants dancing, but core people dancing and people in wheel chairs dancing, you know. And in and through all the funny stories of our people....that was the beginning of the transformation. And I think over the years, the grace of L’Arche is that it brings me back to my heart. I am someone who by nature, with my home brokenness and insecurities, I gain a lot of my self-value out of what I do – what I accomplish, being busy. And you know, just the discipline of being able to sit at the table for an hour and a half...to see the value of just being....”

For Murray, witnessing to the heart, and ministering to it, includes a certain attitude to the body. The hands, the head and the heart all come together in the body, and are integrated through the body. Murray provides insight into his understanding of the significance of the body. He acknowledges that he himself has not “lived” L’Arche with the depth many assistants have, because he is a friend to the community, and not involved in the personal care of core members at any level. However, he has been interested in what Vanier calls “ministering to the body.” He talks about his experiences with the core members, and how they minister to him. It is a mutual process.

Speaking of vulnerability prompts Murray to tell me about his relationship with Rolland, one of the core members in community. To Murray, Rolland is like a brother. Rolland visits Murray’s family for special occasions like Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving. Murray’s family now expects to see Rolland at family gatherings, and looks

forward to his visits, which have been happening on a regular basis for over twenty years. Rolland too feels as if he is part of Murray's family. When Murray lost his brother, Rolland was a good friend to him, and one of the pallbearers at the funeral said: "There is a something special in our relationship. He's part of our family. My brother would drink coffee, sit around and play cards, and Rolland would love to go and spend time with him. Rolland was a pallbearer at my brother's funeral, which was very meaningful to me."

In summary, Murray's narrative is illustrative of his interpretation of L'Arche as a means whereby God lovingly reminds him of his calling. L'Arche brought him, and continues to bring him, home to himself and to his vocation. He clearly perceives the core members as his teachers, and they remind him of the embodied nature of the spirit through what he calls "a theology of the body." His friendship with Rolland creates a link between his biological family and his family at L'Arche. L'Arche seems to have helped him to integrate the various aspects of his life: his priesthood, his family, his career as a social worker, and his role as community chaplain. His experience at L'Arche gives him many stories for the homilies he preaches.

From Murray's narrative and the story of L'Arche five themes of pedagogical importance are discussed to show how it is that L'Arche engages with society in the concrete immediacy of daily life: 1) life sharing, 2) an ethics of possibility, 3) the curriculum of becoming human, 4) the value of narrative, and 5) perspectives on transformative learning.

### **Life sharing**

Life sharing at L'Arche does not happen in some theoretical way, but through the concrete activities of daily life. Life sharing at L'Arche seems to be characterized by warmth, simplicity, relaxation and intensity. Defining this term, O'Brien (2005) writes: "Life sharing refers to a variety of different ways that people live together in intentional communities that include people with developmental disabilities in mutual relationships that aspire to reach beyond the staff-client roles that are typical of many human service settings." (p. 25)

Reinders (2002) writes about "the good life" for citizens with intellectual disabilities, and draws a distinction between "rights" and

“community experience.” Compared to thirty or forty years ago, when it was the norm to segregate people with disabilities within large institutions, today some doors have been opened. According to Reinders, such a movement emphasizes the “rights” of people with disabilities. Theoretically, “rights” create a space for action; they create opportunities for persons to take on new roles as citizens, students, tenants or employees. But the author points out that the discourse of “rights” alone is not enough to guarantee full humanity; people need to participate in each other’s lives in a way that goes beyond “rights,” and emphasizes accepting, sharing, caring, loving and affirming one another. This is what constitutes community: Community is the experience of sharing one’s life with people. (Reinders, 2002)

It is within this context of life sharing that L’Arche finds and creates meaning. It takes us beyond the “rights” discourse into “sharing community.” Reinders proposes that this is the real challenge that people with intellectual disabilities pose to us: not so much what we can do for them, but whether or not we want to “be with them.” Here, through the L’Arche model, we see that being with people who have developmental disabilities does work, and diversity is part of the successful experience of community. Genuine life sharing fosters a strong sense of unity.

### **An ethics of possibility**

From Murray’s story, we see that witnessing to the heart, and ministering to it, includes a certain attitude to the body – a deep sense of dignity, respect and acceptance – a conscious positioning of one’s self before another who needs assistance. Said differently, an “ethics of possibility” refers to a shift in personal consciousness which enables the acceptance of persons who have disabilities as “different others” and not “devalued others” or “deficient others.” Within the context of the living community at L’Arche, no apology is made for difference; rather, it is celebrated. (Moore, 1989)

According to O’Brien (2007), an ethics of possibility is related to the conscious positioning of oneself before a person who has developmental disabilities: “When people count on personal assistants to make it through their day, what is possible for them depends to an

important extent on the way those assistants show up in their lives. Assistants can show up in trivial ways, as mindless guards or keepers, or in more generative ways as creative allies. How they show up is a matter of ethics – by which I mean not rule following, but that sense of what is good that shapes human communication and guides action.” (p. 1)

Working at L’Arche also tells us about embodied language, attentiveness, and how important the body is in communicating our needs and desires. In many ways, “professionalism” in this context is a “visceral” experience grounded in empathetic understanding. It is about coming close, paying attention and listening carefully to what another is saying, as well as not saying. Caregivers must take care not to do violence to the fragility of another, and must recognize the value of waiting and taking time to create an environment for trust and confidence to develop. Professionalism in the care giving context must necessarily include a healthy respect for friendship, and for the capacity that persons with developmental disabilities have to create community.

Through an ethics of possibility, professionals or care givers within L’Arche can reflect on their on their frames of reference and uncover false consciousness, thus making room for themselves as reflective practitioners. They have an opportunity through the community life, to recognize the difference between truth and trivia. Some assistants, aware of this, speak of discovering the true self at L’Arche. Thus, the mission of L’Arche can also foster an “ethics of possibility” that promotes care of the self through care of the other.

### **The curriculum of becoming human**

If L’Arche was to have a curriculum, then it would be called the *Curriculum of Becoming Human*, the process of growing to a maturity of heart (Leggo, 2007, 2005). Leggo’s (2004) views resonate with Vanier’s convictions in this respect; he proposes that educators can be guided by Vanier’s wisdom for becoming human. Through the experiences at L’Arche, we can see that a curriculum of becoming human has at least three interconnected principles.

First, this curriculum of becoming human is rooted in a profound engagement with human living, with face-to-face, heart-to-heart



encounters, based on the sacredness of each person, whatever his or her abilities might be. Second, while so much of school educational culture is based on competition, on measures and assessments that render many students "mediocre," the pedagogy of L'Arche offers an alternative: learning through collaboration and belonging. Third, the curriculum of becoming human encourages one to take responsibility for one's own life, and for the lives of others. It is not just a matter of "live and let live" but rather of "live and help live." In the final analysis, as Leggo (2004) points out, what distinguishes Vanier and the pedagogy of L'Arche is the emphasis on the heart as integral to all learning and growing: "Vanier's challenge and invitation to educators is to reclaim the heart as "a powerhouse of love" that can generate communication and communion and community. What we need in schools is a commitment to investigating seriously and sincerely what it means to be human, to become human, to acknowledge the humanity of other humans, to know our ecological interconnectedness in the wide expanse of earth, even the universe. As educators we need to promote and practice a curriculum of becoming human." (pp. 4-5)

Through L'Arche's pedagogy of the heart, through this curriculum of becoming human, we are offered an opportunity to learn through relationships of caring, commitment, courage, responsibility, belonging, conversation, consideration, and collaboration with the other.

### **The value of narrative**

Retelling the story of L'Arche within and without the community demonstrates the importance of recovering narrative. Through the telling of the story, the community creates meaning, and brings its history alive. The same applies to Fr. Murray's story. Sharkey (1997) writes: "Since human beings are, in Alasdair MacIntyre's phrase, 'story-telling animals', they discover the meaning of their lives not through rights or procedures, but through narrative. For it is narratives that give unity to a human life by uniting a person's past with his or her present, growing out of them towards ends which, though deeply personal, are also shared." (p. 71)

The L'Arche story is shared in numerous ways among community members, and this might have helped Fr. Murray find meaning in his

own narrative, where communities play a role in creating authorship. At L'Arche, community members with or without disabilities are encouraged to share in a common vision, and find unity through the recovery of their own life stories, often discovered through vulnerability.

Vanier talks about how the chaos in the lives of core members causes the assistants to experience the chaos within them. Both community narratives and individual narratives play an important role in "finding voice": "Both of these dimensions are lived at L'Arche in a quite explicit way: the narrative dimension of the community as a whole is continually received by recounting the early beginning of L'Arche's history; and the individual narrative of each member is celebrated and evoked at birthdays and celebrations of ten years spent with the community. The recovery of the narrative dimension of human life is important because it unifies: the past to the present, the weakness to the strength, the failures and setbacks to the success and triumphs. More deeply still, it serves to integrate death, suffering loss into the life of which they are a part." (Sharkey, 1997, pp. 71-72)

The recovery of narrative, includes the inevitable and the unmanageable aspects of life, allows for the growth of communities where narrative is a cementing force. Valuing narrative in this way sends out a message that is countercultural because it grants a place to vulnerability and brokenness. It is in this ordinary life of burnt toast and spilt coffee that the recovery of narrative takes place, bringing unity and meaning to persons and events. Stories within stories create places of belonging, and aid in building communities. It is through listening to the narratives of the people they work with, and through the sharing of their own, that caregivers and other professionals in the field of assisted living create a space for persons with developmental disabilities to make a contribution.

### **Perspectives on transformation**

The stories of community members speak of personal transformation characterized by three stages: 1) coming to l'Arche, 2) experiencing change or disruption and 3) knowing transformation. Within the context of social engagement and adult education Mezirow (1991) developed his transformative learning theory to explain the process individuals go

through when transformation takes place. Consistent with Mezirow, Cranton (1998) writes that when people experience change in their lives, find themselves in a dilemma, or encounter new information that contradicts what they have already believed, then they may revise their earlier beliefs and perspective. Applying this trajectory to the narratives of L'Arche, we note that L'Arche is a place where community members encounter new information that contradicts previous held beliefs and perceptions, particularly about persons with developmental disabilities and their contribution to society. Their narratives become a landscape through which we come to understand something about nature of personal transformation and the effect it has on community.

Murray's narrative shows that he spent time reflecting on and integrating his experiences at L'Arche. In this his experience bears out Mezirow's (1991) suggestion that the central dynamic of transformative learning is a rational, cognitive process of reflection. Thus, insofar as it brings critical reflection to the surface, transformative learning theory applied to the L'Arche context may be beneficial to assistants: by becoming critically reflective about their meaning schemes and meaning perspectives they could potentially integrate their experiences in more meaningful ways, exercising their capacity for agency within the context of personal transformation. Here, the question that may be asked is this: *what about core members? Do they experience transformation, and how might we understand their experiences?*

While Mezirow's theory is helpful for understanding the transformative pedagogy of L'Arche, this pedagogy in turn makes a contribution to Mezirow's theory. The various narratives of community members challenge Mezirow's rather singular focus on critical reflection as the defining concept in transformative learning. These narratives also draw attention to the affective and intuitive dimensions of transformative learning. In other words, transformation needs to be understood as a multidimensional concept of expanding consciousness, involving head and heart, image and word, insight and reflection, consciousness and unconsciousness. This is particularly meaningful to



core members, who find narrative a meaningful way of participating in community. In this way L'Arche engages the intellectual community and brings a gentle corrective to dominant understandings of transformative learning.

A final question is this: are all who come to L'Arche transformed by its way of life? The answer is, "not necessarily." Although L'Arche is viewed with much positive regard, there are aspects of community life that come under severe criticism. For example, assistants working within L'Arche are sometimes unable to integrate the ideal with the real, and the personal with the professional. Community becomes a place of refuge, or an umbrella to hide under. The experience of burnout can leave one hurt, deeply disappointed, disillusioned with community life and filled with morose introspection. Assistants can experience L'Arche in many ways – as caregiver, friend or martyr. The value and shortcoming of a set up such as L'Arche is in need of deeper study and analysis.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, as Somerville (2006, 2007) points out, we must remember that the ethical tone of a society is not set by how it treats its most powerful, strong and independent citizens, but how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. Although L'Arche may not suit everyone, it is correct to say that challenges the ethical imagination of a society to engage with its weakest members in creating communities where difference is not deficiency.

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